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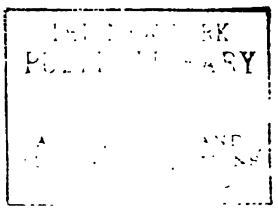

"IS THE HOUSE TOO QUIET FOR YOU, MAGGIE?"

MR. TUCKERMAN'S NIECES

BY

HELEN DAWES BROWN

ILLUSTRATED

BOSTON AND NEW YORK
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MR. TUCKERMAN'S NIECES

I

THE LEGATEE

MR. TUCKERMAN tried to behave as if nothing remarkable had happened to him that day. He went home at the customary hour, but he fitted his key into the lock with a graver care than usual, selected with more judgment the peg on which he hung his hat, and, entering his library, made elaborate preparations for reading.

Not a sound had greeted his entrance into his house. On other days he took cheerful note of the stillness: it marked the regularity and calm with which his life was ordered. Mr. Tuckerman particularly disliked the clamor and excitement of arrivals and departures.

It was the late afternoon of a backward May. On the hearth a fire ticked and purred with sociable little sounds that promised friendliness and companionship. The master of the house responded absently with a poke and a fresh stick of wood.

It was when he took up a book that he himself felt the difference begin: he could not read. Since that letter in the morning mail, he had gone through the day attending to all its duties, only fulfilling each with a little extra faithfulness. Now he sat at rest among his books at the end of the day; but his hand laid feeble hold upon a volume and then shoved it away with vigor. Two or

three times in his youth Tuckerman's appetite for books had failed him: strange that the death of a brother-in-law whom he had never seen should bring about an emotional crisis in which he was incapable of reading. He settled into his chair, and gazed into the fire.

The western light had gone, and the room was darkening, when there appeared in the doorway the excellent Maggie Murphy. "Will ye be ready for the dinner, s'r-r?"

"Yes, yes, Maggie. I'll come, I'll come." He rose slowly, shaking off something very like calamity.

The dining-room opened from the opposite side of the square "front entry" in the old colonial dwelling. One wall of the room was of paneled woodwork. A broad hand-wrought beam crossed the low ceiling; stout square posts stood at the corners, and where walls and ceiling met, the beams formed a heavy cornice. The room stood in its solid framework, and ignored the passing of time. Its proportions were perfect, for the old village builders and cabinet-makers understood their art.

Mr. Tuckerman's dining-room contained the necessary furniture in old mahogany, and the necessary china in "old blue." Each wall-space had a single picture hung upon its neutral background.

The meal that Maggie set before her master was as simple as the room, for Maggie was so good a cook that she could afford to serve him with plain food. She lingered, to enjoy the society of her "gintleman." Maggie was, as she described herself, a "settled body," and as suitable and well selected as everything else in Mr. Tuckerman's admirable bachelor establishment. She had Irish tact, and knew when to retire to the kitchen

and when to stay by in sympathetic silence. She waited upon him through this meal with affectionate zeal, pressing food upon him which he barely tasted. Curiosity rose within her; her eyes were bright in her plain old face as she studied him. His meal ended, Tuckerman often forgot to leave the table, and then was Maggie's opportunity. She made errands to and fro, and was an unconscionable time in clearing away the dishes of a solitary diner.

"Maggie, do you ever feel lonely?"

"No, that I don't; do you, s'r-r?" Maggie took liberties, but always with a "s'r-r."

"No," was the prompt and firm answer, to Maggie's immediate relief. The possibility of the marriage of her master was the one thing that unsettled her peace.

"Is the house too quiet for you, Maggie?"

"It 's hiven; it 's just that."

"So it is," Maggie rejoiced. That not impossible "She" faded once more.

"It would be a great change if —"

"If yez was to marry, s'r-r," cut in Maggie. "'Dade an' it would. Ye 'd find it so yerself. Ye 'd not be allowed so much readin', s'r-r, I 'm thinkin'. And where 'd be the quiet o' yer meals?"

Mr. Tuckerman did not choose to be amused; he turned uneasily in his chair.

"No doubt you always know what is your duty, Maggie."

"An' if I don't, I 'm going to Father Reilly every Saturday night, s'r-r."

Tuckerman smiled to himself as he thought of his own young priest, minister of the church in which

Tuckerman paid pew rent for the sake of his mother's memory. He had a whimsical impulse to consult his youthful pastor: he knew him to be a student of duty and an educated thinker about conduct. What would such a young theorist say upon a question like that raised by the morning letter? He could guess, since Mathison preached the religion of self-sacrifice. Tuckerman had supposed that he himself stood for the ideal: he had thought that his own way of life made for "the things that are most excellent;" yet he had a conviction that either Father Reilly's or young Mathison's Christianity might demand more of him.

As he returned to his library, he found himself thinking in circles; he needed to talk in order to set his own thoughts in order.

"Hullo, Partridge! sit down. I want your opinion."

Partridge had lounged in at ten o'clock, had settled himself upon a deep old sofa, and had signified a desire to go to sleep. An evening nap was one of his habits, and he was as likely to take it on a friend's sofa as upon his own.

"Wake up, Partridge, and listen."

Partridge sat up straight after the first sentence or two of Tuckerman's story.

"I don't talk about my family affairs," he began.

"Did n't know you had any."

"You knew I had a sister. She went west to visit a school friend, and married. It was while I was in Europe. She married out of her own sphere."

"Were you acquainted with your brother-in-law?" asked Partridge.

"I never saw him. I know the class he belonged to,

however. A decent fellow enough; it was only that she married unsuitably — out of her own world."

"Loved him, perhaps?"

"There's no doubt of that."

"And was happy, maybe?"

"Until her boy was drowned. That killed her."

"How many children were there?"

"Five. There are three girls left."

"Must have been a hard pull for that brother-in-law."

"I did a little," said Tuckerman painfully. "A check now and then."

Partridge took no notice. "You never saw them?"

"They could not come east, and I have never, I confess, had the inclination to go to Chicago."

"You went in '93? You were at the Fair?"

"No," said Tuckerman firmly. He had not attended the Chicago World's Fair, and he had never been coerced into saying that he was sorry.

Partridge was ten years younger than his admired friend Tuckerman. Their sympathy was largely based on the great number of things they both disliked; but the enthusiasm of Partridge still preserved some subjects to disagree upon.

"When you have done with the Fair, I want to consult you about a serious matter. I had a letter to-day from a Chicago lawyer. My poor brother-in-law died last week. He had been ill for months. He left a will. He has willed his three daughters to me," said Tuckerman grimly. "I am the legally appointed guardian of three young girls, Partridge."

It was then that Partridge sat up straight.

"Moreover, their father had a curious kind of aspiration for them, or magnanimity, or stupidity, I don't know what to call it. He particularly requested that they should make their home with me. Heaven knows where he got his idea of me."

"And the lawyer wants shipping instructions?" suggested his friend. "There's another question you don't mind my asking: what provision —"

Tuckerman interrupted him. "The estate consists of lands in Nebraska, on which they pay taxes and build air-castles, and ten thousand dollars of life insurance — poor fellow, what that must have cost him! I wonder he did as much as that."

"You are n't such a cold-blooded rascal as you think you are, Tuckerman."

"But do you get the sense of this, Partridge? I always expected to contribute to the support of my nieces — we won't go into that; but I never anticipated giving up my home and my life to a parcel of girls."

"That's about what it amounts to, ain't it?" said Partridge genially. He was coming round, after the first shock, to a humorous view of the situation. Tuckerman, surrounded by a bevy of nieces, tickled his fancy. His friend's anxious face led him on.

"How will Maggie take it, for example?"

"She'll go," answered Partridge consolingly. "How do their ages run?"

"The eldest is eighteen, or was. She signs a letter, 'Your affectionate niece, Lucy T. Bell.' She can be taught to omit the T. I particularly dislike initials except for business purposes."

"Lucy will probably have to be taught a number of

things besides dropping the letter T — since you are so frank about your nieces. You've a noble task — taming three fair barbarians. Pray, how does the next sign herself?"

"Frances Tuckerman Bell, in a bold hand, too large for a lady. She comes after Lucy; I am rather uncertain as to their ages. I know the boy was the third." Tuckerman's voice dropped. It was one of the mysteries of the heart that he never ceased to mourn for this little nephew, and yearned over his brief life with the strongest paternal feeling that had ever moved him. He had no such emotion at thought of his nieces.

"If it had been three boys — well, they might have been a handful; but three girls, what am I to do with them, tell me!"

"I should off with them to boarding-school, all three. How old is the youngest?"

"Betty? Ten — it's my impression she is ten. They have all been obliged to write me letters, because I have occasionally sent them presents. That is a function of the bachelor uncle. It seems I am to develop others."

"Tuckerman, it is hard on you. You have my honest sympathy."

"These breaks have to come, I suppose, that cut one's life in two. I was getting to like this too well." Tuckerman looked about upon his books, his pictures, even upon his inkstand. With three nieces in the house, should he ever again have that calm and single-minded absorption in his work, that utter, undisturbed abandon to the things he loved best? The married, he knew, denied these sweet and simple satisfactions of the celibate life. He could tell them of a host of little

loves and cares that the bachelor nurtures into sources of daily felicity. He it is who has leisure and quiet to perfect his small pleasures, to detect and dwell upon their fine shades, to taste like an epicure the delicacies of life. What can be made of life by an individual Tuckerman fancied he was showing: he had achieved a serene home, a day full of noble interests, and a mind at peace with itself. He even believed that he had solved the problem of domestic service better than most housewives.

That life should be kept free from complications was his aim; and of all complications, those introduced by women were most to be dreaded. The experience of marriage in his own family helped to content him with his lot. His brother had married a high-colored beauty, to find her a small-witted, small-souled woman who cramped and thwarted his life. His sister's unfortunate marriage had exposed her to sorrow that had crushed her.

"I advise boarding-school, by all means," Partridge continued soberly, "if you consult me in earnest. In that case, you would have them only for vacations. That would dispose of them till they are twenty or more, and then you will marry them off."

"Will that fall to me, too?" sighed the anxious uncle.

"Without a doubt. Or they may marry you off. That's within the possibilities. You may be able to hand them over to your sister-in-law, Mrs. Horace Tuckerman. By the way, how will this strike Mrs. Horace?"

Tuckerman gave a dismal grin.

"You'd better set her to look up a boarding-school."

There were aspects of the situation that Tuckerman could not discuss yet with even so good a friend as Partridge. There were questions of ways and means. He was rapidly casting about in his mind for the possibilities of increasing his income. A small inheritance was supplemented by the salary of a lectureship held in the neighboring university. It was a modest post; when a letter from his eldest niece had addressed him as "professor," he had returned the envelope with the word neatly erased. The niece, oblivious of reproof, had taken the correction gayly, as humility and facetiousness on the part of her uncle.

Partridge's suggestion of a boarding-school for the disposal of his wards was tempting, but impracticable. They must live in his home as a matter of economy, and he must look about for an increase of revenue. He might undertake a piece of plain teaching in the university. Tuckerman hated the work of the class-room as much as he enjoyed that of lecturing to graduates. "Ramming it into the young cubs," he declared, was a process he detested. Moreover, he grudged his leisure. The attainment of rational leisure he regarded as his chief success; and the prospect that confronted him was that of a busy, anxious, calculating life.

However, the financial support of his nieces was far less a problem to him than what may be called their moral support. To bring up three girls and to place them properly in the world: it was nothing less he had to face. Whom had he to help him?

"I'll take a hand at it," said Partridge cheerfully. "Mrs. Horace Tuckerman will probably do her share, too."

"I am afraid she will. Partridge, I am going to try Miss Sarah Wynne."

"Upon my word, Tuckerman, your devotion to an old schoolmistress who taught you the first declension is the prettiest thing I am acquainted with. Talk it all over with your old lady-love. She'll advise boarding-school, I'll bet you a hat."

Tuckerman followed his friend to the door. "If you are looking up that route, you need not consider me. You will have to go alone, Partridge."

"I shall not go. I am bound to see the nieces. I would n't miss it."

II

THE LEGACY

A TALL, fair girl dressed in black walked quickly across the bridge, without pausing to look at the river and the ships in the late afternoon sunlight. She went swiftly on through the lower streets till she turned into a pleasant avenue lined with shade-trees. Her step did not slacken until she reached a doorway set on either side with bells and letter-boxes. The girl mounted lightly the two flights of stairs, fitted her key in the door, and entered with a joyous little cry, such as she always announced herself with, even through the darkest days of the last winter. Her little sister answered with a subdued whoop, and ran to meet her.

"It is the loveliest weather. I walked home."

"To save car-fare," said the other sister. "Don't pretend you did n't."

"It 's only a mile from Mr. Daggett's office. Children, I have a great deal to tell you. I must sit down; I believe I am tired." There were dark circles under her eyes, and her color had gone. She sat down limply, upon the first chair.

"It was just a week ago to-night." This was as near as Lucy came to "giving way," but Frances burst out, "I'm going to cry; I ought to cry. People that have such troubles have a right."

"No, no, dear Fanny, dear Fanny. You make your-

self sick. We never needed so to be well and strong. Betty, come here, little sister."

Betty nestled against Lucy and sobbed softly and pitifully. It wrung the elder sister's heart. Her own voice became sweet and firm again. "Come, Betty, help me to get supper, and Fanny will set the table."

"I don't care if I never eat again," said Frances. "It's heartless to eat."

"I shall not tell you this wonderful thing until we have had our supper, and cleared it away besides."

"Setting the table is the worst of all, because there is always his place;" and the cups and saucers were blurred through Frances' tears.

Yet it was she who was the first to laugh when they were seated at the table. "We have a cold supper because it's such lovely warm weather. More of Lucy's weather."

"There's nothing like Chicago when it is lovely."

"It makes you *wild* to do things!"

"I want to go and see the animals in the Park tomorrow, and swing," spoke up Betty.

"You shall do it," said Lucy thankfully. She could live with her own sore heart, but she could ill bear Betty's grief. "First mama died; then papa:" when Betty sobbed that in her ear Lucy sounded the depths of her own sorrow.

Lucy Bell had taken her discipline early in life; her character was in advance of her years. Just now she was pathetically old for eighteen, and it was a question whether she would ever recover her lost youth. Only a great change in her lot might bring the possibility.

"The baby lions must have grown a good deal *since*."

Lucy spoke quickly. "We'll go directly after breakfast, Betty."

"Lu, tell us quick what Mr. Daggett said," begged Frances, as she finished her cold bread pudding.

"I like Mr. Daggett," observed Betty, with her mouth full.

"He was one of father's best and kindest friends, and so he is ours," began Lucy with formality. "Whatever he advises, we'd better do. Now listen."

"I like Mr. Daggett, he is so funny. When people say 'American humor,' it's Mr. Daggett's way of saying things that they mean. I just love to hear him talk."

"He was n't particularly funny this afternoon," continued Lucy. "He was terribly solemn. It was a very serious thing that he explained to me. I wonder a little that father did not tell us what his wishes were. No, I see he could n't; but he talked to Mr. Daggett a great deal."

"Oh, what did he say?" asked Frances, her eyes brimming with tears.

"I am going to tell you. The nearest relative we have in the world is our mother's only brother, and he is appointed our guardian."

"What do we need of a guardian? What is a guardian, anyway, when there is nothing to guard?"

"There is n't any money to speak of, but there's all three of us. Father was very particular about us: he wanted us guarded. And now I come to the important part: he wanted us to go east and to live with

our uncle, and we've never once seen him in all our lives."

"I shan't go," said Frances.

"Mr. Daggett says it was what father had set his heart on. It was his dying wish."

They were all silent at this.

Betty spoke first. "I don't like any place but Chicago."

"Nor I," said Lucy.

"We could earn our living here," Frances protested.

"I expected to: that is why I learned typewriting. I'd much rather, but there is another way to look at it," Lucy continued earnestly. "Poor Uncle Ellery is all alone in the world. Mother wished he would marry, but you could never get him to. He is old, — over forty. He is so lonely that I think we ought to go to him, and try to make him comfortable and happy as he is getting older. I should keep house, and we would all do our very best to make him feel as if he had a home and a family."

"I guess he'll think he's got a family. I'm not going to make such a sacrifice of myself, though, — I'm not going to give up Chicago for any uncle."

"Not if it was father's last wish?"

Frances' mouth twitched.

Betty had been thinking. "Will he be like papa?"

"Probably," said Lucy, "when we get to know him well."

"I never liked Uncle Ellery, for all his presents," Frances began, in another tone.

"He must be very rich," said Betty solemnly.

"Not very rich," Lucy corrected her, "yet rich enough for us to go and live with him, I think."

"We need n't eat a great deal," said Betty, having finished a comfortable meal. "And we won't be noisy."

"I'm not going anywhere where I can't be noisy if I feel like it;" and Frances threw back her head.

"Don't you want to make Uncle Ellery happy?" asked her elder sister.

"I do," said the obedient little Betty.

"Well, I don't," persisted Frances. "He's nothing to us. He'd like to get rid of us with checks. Why should we want to make him happy? We've got ourselves to make happy."

Lucy said nothing, but looked at her two sisters with a tenderness like a mother's, for she knew how much they had to learn. Lucy was hardly older than Betty when she had taken her mother's place. The woman neighbors had watched and blamed and praised; but had agreed that it would be "excusable" if the father of the three little girls should marry again. Years passed, however, and the mother's place was not filled. In another sense it was supplied, in the development of character that took place in the father and the eldest daughter. He became father and mother to his children: a strange, sweet growth in the nature of the widowed man, a watchful, yearning tenderness flowing from out the depths of a virile soul. He heard their prayers each night with new love for God and for his little daughters. These children prayed of their own accord for their mother in heaven, and invented their own mass for the dead. They awakened in their father a new spiritual life in mystic union with his wife. He was not a reader of Dante, but Dante's thought was his day and night.

"She dwelleth in heaven with the angels, and on earth with my soul."

The little eldest sister grew in motherliness. Not that Lucy was faultless: she liked to make people happy, but she would like to have them happy in her way. When a girl acquires authority at her age, it leaves its mark upon her. She was now fired with a generous zeal for making over her lonely uncle's existence.

"It is our opportunity. If we could n't have father, this is our next great duty." Her fervor brought tears to her eyes.

"I'm not so good as you are," said Frances gloomily. "You might go alone."

"Whatever happened, we were all to keep together, — that was father's wish, too."

"There's one good thing, — I shan't have to go to school any more."

"Shall I have to, Lucy?" inquired Betty.

"Indeed you will, little miss. It would n't surprise me if Uncle Ellery sent us all to school."

"I should like to see him make me go to school," said Frances, "even if he is my guardian."

"Father thought a great deal of education. I believe that is why he wanted us to go to live near Boston, in that atmosphere."

"I can't bear Boston, from all I've heard of it. I don't want atmosphere — I want air. Air is what you get in Chicago!"

"Mr. Daggett wrote five days ago to Uncle Ellery. We shall hear from him soon."

"Some letters came while you were out," said Frances.

"I knew they were condolence letters and I did n't want to open them."

"People are so kind. I never knew before we had so many friends, people that appreciated — him. Mr. Daggett told me — " Lucy's voice broke. "I can't tell you yet all he said. Yes, this is Uncle Ellery's letter. Oh, I dread to read it."

"Don't, till to-morrow."

"We must, we have so many plans to make. We have to end all this — our home — our furniture, — all these dear, ugly, shabby things." Lucy stopped herself suddenly, and began in a cheerful tone, "It is a rather long letter. He has always written very short ones. Sit still round the table while you listen." Lucy read as follows: —

My dear Nieces, — I hope soon to be better acquainted with you, for, as you have doubtless been informed, your father's will provides that you should make your home with me as your nearest living relative. I want to prepare you to find me a very dull person, and my home an exceedingly quiet one. I hope you may like to live in Twinbridge; there are many pretty walks, a charming river, and woods not far away. If you care for books, there is a good town library; I have also a number of books in my own house. I am told there are pleasant young people.

I take it your education is not yet finished, and you will agree with me that school must be considered. There will be time for that in the autumn, since we are now approaching the end of the school year.

I have an excellent servant and housekeeper, who

will make you comfortable, I hope. I shall have three small chambers prepared for you, and my present guest room shall be arranged as a sitting-room for your use. You will live in your great-grandfather's house, which is more than a century old. You must be prepared to find the ceilings low and the stairways crooked. Also, I regret to say, of the three rooms which you are to occupy, one is entered through another, and a third is on a different level, with two steps down. Such was the building of colonial times, and yet you may agree with me that it has a charm of its own that somewhat compensates for the inconvenience.

The sitting-room is the southeast upper room. You will need your own study, for I am at work in my library a great part of the day.

If you will let me know the date when it will be convenient for you to leave your present home, I will go to Chicago and will bring you back with me to Twinbridge. No doubt you could be prepared to leave Chicago within a few hours of my arrival there.

If I have neglected to give you any details that you should know, pray tell me.

I hope soon to see you.

Your affectionate uncle,

ELLERY TUCKERMAN.

"Well, of all the dismal letters! 'Nearest living relative'— that just expresses it." Frances had listened intent, her elbows on the table, her chin resting on her hands.

"That letter was meant to be very kind." Lucy looked it over a second time.

"Does he say he *wants* us to come? does he say he *cares* anything about us?"

"Why should he want us? Why should he care about us — yet?"

"You think he has only to see us, we're so charming. No; what that letter says is, I'll do my duty if I die for it! And we have got to be the victims. I'd rather be a typewriter in a down-town office — a thousand times rather!"

Betty looked bewildered. "I should like that room up the crooked stairs, with the two steps down," ventured Betty.

"Yes, those crooked stairs and the house all up and down, — that is the only interesting part of it."

"Books and the woods?" suggested Lucy.

"But he means to poke us off upstairs into a kind of nursery. We're not to sit in the parlor!"

"He means we are not to sit in little bedrooms. I thought that was the nicest thing in the letter, the southeast sitting-room and the sunshine."

"And my goodness, we are all three to be marched off to school, it seems. Lucy, I am going to have a talk with Mr. Daggett myself. I should like to know if it is the law of the land that a Chicago girl has to go to Boston — or to what is just as bad as Boston — to spend her days, if she does n't want to." Frances talked for some time in this strain without contradiction, till at last she flung herself back in her chair, saying, "Oh, well, I suppose I shall come round. We have to stay together, Lu; we've nobody else. If you go, I shall, and that's the end of it. Do you propose to stay in Chicago, little girl?"

Betty nestled close to Lucy for answer, and put an arm round her neck.

"That was simply heroic, to say he would come out here and take us back," said Lucy. "He is going to be a thorough guardian, you can see that. But it is entirely unnecessary; I should never allow it. We can take a through train to Boston, and he can meet us there and take us out to Twinbridge."

"Shall I ride on the cars all day and all night?" cried Betty.

III

THE HOUSE UNDER THE HILL

"I SHOULD like to see the changes you have made," commanded Mrs. Horace Tuckerman. "I might have given you some suggestions. But I am ready to see," she said, as she led the way upstairs.

Tuckerman had not proceeded without consulting a woman, but his adviser had been his old friend Miss Wynne. The coming of the nieces she very truly declared to be an event in her life. She entered with gayety into questions of furnishing, and with long experience of girls and their taste in curtains and wall papers, she gave him invaluable aid. "Whiteness and brightness," said Miss Sarah Wynne; "flowers wherever you can get them; not too much softness; comfort, not luxury; but as many hooks and drawers as you can contrive." This was the substance of her advice, which ended with, "Bring them to see me as soon as they have had a night's sleep."

Tuckerman followed Mrs. Horace up the pretty stairway, with its white balusters and dark railing. "They knew how to make easy stairs in those quiet days," he said by way of conversation, as they took three steps to a square landing, and then a turn with five or six steps more to another landing; then another turn and three steps to the upper hall. Mrs. Tuckerman took no heed of him, but remarked, "You have gone

to considerable trouble and expense." This time her brother-in-law took no notice; such being their usual way of carrying on a conversation.

"They have no belongings of their own, I presume?" inquired Mrs. Horace in her thinnest voice.

"It hardly seemed worth while to transport furniture a thousand miles."

"I thought as much," said she to herself. "H'm!" she murmured, as she inspected the bedrooms. "You've gone largely into flowered chintz and white paint. A flower for each room: I see the idea. Yes, I see the idea." Mrs. Horace pondered upon it without enthusiasm. "I advise you not to pamper them. I am glad to see you have got bare floors."

"Oh, a rug or two," Tuckerman protested mildly.

"Young people expect a great deal too much in these days."

Mrs. Horace was turning to go downstairs, when Tuckerman said, boldly, "Won't you see the girls' sitting-room?"

"Sitting-room?"

Tuckerman hastened to apologize. "I could n't very well have them sit in my library, and you know I have nothing of the nature of a parlor."

"You have n't taken your guest room?" This room, by the way, had been a great convenience to Mr. Tuckerman's sister-in-law. "I am surprised that you should give up your spare chamber."

Tuckerman hated the defensive attitude, which Mrs. Horace always drove him into. "The circumstances are somewhat changed. I am less likely to have bachelor guests in the house."

"Gus will have to get acquainted with his cousins," said Mr. Tuckerman, but the lady took no notice of his remark. She had her thoughts on the subject, nevertheless; that the uncle of Gus should be diverting his interest and more particularly his money from his only nephew to three stranger nieces was matter for anxious consideration. So far as innocent girls could be said to have an enemy, Lucy, Frances, and Betty had one prepared to meet them on their arrival.

"What did you do with the chamber set?" demanded Mrs. Horace, this being the kind of question a sister-in-law is privileged to put. Tuckerman had often observed that she treated him as a child playing with a house. A man without wife or children could not be supposed to be dealing seriously with tables and chairs and teapots.

"It went into the attic, I believe."

"I might have made use of that mattress. There was a very good old mirror, was n't there?"

"That I keep in the sitting-room. I believe girls like to glance at themselves."

"I should like to see what is your notion of a parlor for three young girls."

"There is not much in it at present. They will probably have some ideas of their own."

"And altogether wrong ones, depend upon it. Are you going to leave them those andirons? They 'd rather have gas logs. Those andirons belonged to Horace's mother, did n't they?"

"Horace's mother and mine," said Tuckerman firmly.

"The trouble was that when Horace and I were

married, old things had n't come up, and of course I had handsome things of my own. All the Babcocks had. We did n't depend on our husband's family for our furniture. But I want Gus should have his share of the antiques."

"Tell Gus to come over and take anything he wants."

"Oh, of course, a boy of thirteen can't judge: you ought to know that. Gus treats furniture much better than most boys, however. Up to a certain age, they —"

"Kick it."

"Not Gus," said his mother tenderly. "He never kicked it intentionally."

"I had a carpenter put some book-shelves round that corner," said Tuckerman aimlessly.

"Books? Ah, yes, it will be an education to them to live in Twinbridge." This was such a familiar remark that Tuckerman hardly heard it. Turning his back on Mrs. Horace, he looked at his watch.

"I suppose you will take a definite stand about chewing-gum? *They all chew gum.* The girls are in black, of course; there will be no chance for a display of Western millinery and buttons and buckles."

"Laura, you will have to excuse me. They are to arrive in Boston at six o'clock; I must take the next train to the city."

"Are n't you a little nervous?" asked Mrs. Horace agreeably. "It can't be altogether pleasant."

"You 'll excuse me —"

"I must really say a word to Maggie." But Tuckerman had escaped.

Mrs. Horace Tuckerman's incursions into her brother-in-law's kitchen were in the face of the enemy and

proved her courage. She maintained the right to enter any part of his house as the female representative of his family.

"Well, Maggie," said she authoritatively, "how do you do?"

"I'm very well, m'm," answered Maggie, bearing on harder as she rubbed a brass faucet.

"You will have a considerably larger family, shan't you?" Mrs. Tuckerman had long felt it a grievance against Maggie that she had too easy a situation.

Maggie was intellectually of the quality that despises all asking of questions whose answers are obvious. She gave the faucet a vicious rub. She was, in truth, not happy.

"You may be looking for a lighter place, a family of two again."

Maggie's look was haughty, and she made no reply.

"I suppose the oldest will take charge of the housekeeping. I can see how you feel, and I don't wonder, after having it all your own way so long."

"Mr. Tuckerman is the masther in his own house," said Maggie with dignity, "and he'll be the same still, whether it's nieces or anny other relations." The faucet shone, and Maggie was hot with rage and exertion. She turned to the stove and uncovered a saucepan.

"Are n't you putting a good deal of butter into that, Maggie?" said Mrs. Tuckerman, not to be daunted by "a servant's impertinence." Maggie walked into the pantry, and her persecutor dared not follow her. She retreated with an affable "Good afternoon."

Tuckerman was by this time on his way to Boston, on the "errand of his life," he said to himself dryly. He

had shared with Partridge a whimsical attitude towards himself, pitying, amused, philosophical.

"You're in deep as a bachelor uncle," observed Partridge, and it was Tuckerman's own impression. Plain sacrifices he expected to make, and to keep silent about them like a gentleman. Sacrifice was of the warp and woof of a good man's—"a decent fellow's"—life: so spoke the inherited Christianity in his blood. But apparently something more than the mere giving up of leisure and liberty and material things was required of him. He feared for himself a loss of identity, the necessity of becoming somebody else in this new situation.

Meanwhile, he was doing his duty scrupulously, up to the limit of his imagination. He had left nothing undone for the comfort and welfare of his nieces, since they had been placed in his charge. A carriage now waited to convey them across the city from station to station, and an express wagon was to follow fast with their luggage; but Tuckerman stood upon the platform with a heart less well prepared. He compared watch and station clock, and observed with a sense of reprieve that the bulletin board reported the train twenty minutes late. He glanced at the people that streamed past him. That among them all there was no one that touched him or concerned him, was a restful and congenial feeling. Tuckerman liked the peace of isolation in a crowd. He caught sight of a man he knew, and carelessly but carefully walked away from him. In the steady roar of the vast re-echoing station there seemed around him a little oasis of silence. For half an hour he spoke to no one and no one spoke to him. Those would

soon arrive whom there was no avoiding, and he searched the bulletin in the hope that the train might have lost a few minutes more. There was no second reprieve; only five minutes remained — of his old life.

Tuckerman stood by the in-coming train and scanned the faces of the travelers. He settled his eye-glasses for close inspection and peered at young ladies in a way disagreeable to himself at least; when all at once he heard voices at his back: "Oh, are you our uncle? We knew you must be! How lucky we made you describe yourself!"

The uncle felt painfully shy as he turned about. Moreover, he was struck with reproach that he had allowed so much youth and beauty to arrive in the great city, on the chance of finding at once their right protector. He had been borne down by Lucy's arguments, summed up in, "Of course, Uncle Ellery, you know we have some sense." Henceforth their guardian determined to act as he saw fit.

He, on his part, could have no doubt of their identity. Yet they looked quite different from his picture of them, these three sombre young figures in black; he had always fancied gay, laughing, bright-ribboned nieces must come out of the West. The little group touched his heart unexpectedly, and made an end of his shyness. Reaching an open space, he said, "Now let us stop and get acquainted. Lucy," and he gravely shook hands with his eldest niece; "Frances," and with the next; "Betty," — to his amazement Betty gave a jump and kissed him, and set his eye-glasses flying. Lucy handed them back to him, and he replaced them with the reflection that he might as well begin at once to be patient.

"You have been very, very kind, Uncle Ellery," said Lucy, making a speech for the three. Her uncle, meeting her bright, grateful eyes, said confidently to himself, "The intelligent one. The second says least: evidently the shy one. The youngest is a baby still."

The blackness of their attire weighed upon him. He spoke to them with deference, feeling that they knew more of sorrow than he did; and he could not bring himself to speak of their home or their parents. The result was that he grew stiff and impersonal, and his niece Frances reflected with all her wisdom that this was probably the famous Boston manner about which she had read so much in novels. Nor did it seem an altogether cordial welcome: "Perhaps you will come this way to the carriage." "Ah," pondered Frances, "a thoroughly manly man does n't say 'perhaps.'" She walked ahead of him in the direction he indicated. It was Betty who bore the burden of the conversation on the short journey to Twinbridge.

"I hope it will interest you," said Tuckerman, "that you are going to your great-grandfather's house. Your grandmother was married from it, and your mother made visits there when she was of your age. It passed out of the family, but a few years ago I bought it, and made it my home."

"How perfectly lovely!" cried Lucy, which made her uncle feel stiffer than ever. He had never known what to reply to that remark of young ladies.

Frances could have said a great deal, but would not. Her imagination flew to the old house, and her face took on its high romantic look.

"I suppose not many people in Chicago live in their

great-grandfathers' houses." Mr. Tuckerman was instantly aware of the infelicity of his remark. Frances looked scornfully out of the car window.

"Because they were all burned up in 1871," said Betty cheerfully; "that is the reason why."

"One reason," said Lucy mildly; "but then so many of the great-grandfathers' houses are in Europe."

"A large foreign population, I know." Tuckerman read articles in the "Atlantic" and the "Nation" upon the subject, but had never cared for closer contact with it.

"*I* think that's very interesting," and Betty nodded her head. "That's what I should like to see — everybody's great-grandfather's house, — everybody that is in America now. But there would n't be one: there'd be *four!*"

Tuckerman smiled. "People usually take the pick of their ancestors, I've noticed. There might be a choice among the four houses."

Frances' face lighted up with the idea. She pursued it; she at once conceived the four houses.

"One of your own four, for example, was much grander than the one you are going to. That was in Boston."

"Was it a colonial mansion?" asked Betty, with careful pronunciation.

"Yes; mine is a colonial dwelling-house, that is all. It stands on a straight street under a sunny bank, as the early settlers used to say. And here we are at the door."

The railway omnibus stopped before tall white gateposts, from which a short brick walk ran to the low

doorsteps. Long white-painted trellises leaned against the house on either side of the dark green door, and prairie roses and sweet-scented honeysuckles clambered and drooped over them. A pair of great elms stood by the roadside in front of the house.

Tuckerman sincerely meant a tender welcome as he helped his nieces to alight, and as he said in his most matter-of-fact voice, "This is your home. This is the old house under the hill."

IV

MISS SARAH WYNNE

"I PROMISED," said Mr. Tuckerman at the breakfast table, "that as soon as you were rested from your journey, I would take you to see my friend Miss Sarah Wynne."

The girls' faces expressed prodigious interest and surprise, till their uncle laughed and very nearly blushed.

"Miss Wynne lives at the Ridge. The Ridge is a boarding and day school for girls, where Miss Wynne is a parlor boarder."

"Why, Uncle Ellery!"

"You may have heard of the Ridge? You may have read the poet Coverdale?" ("As if we had n't!" said Frances to herself.) "There's the Ridge edition of his works. It was a clever idea to take his house for a school."

The girls listened, hoping to reach Miss Sarah Wynne in time.

"There is the room in the wing which was his study, and it is occupied by Miss Wynne. You will like to visit that room as well as to see my friend." The girls were all eagerness. "She has gone there to spend her old age."

"Oh!" gasped the nieces.

"She sits in her armchair crippled with rheumatism, but never talks about it."

"*Why* does she go to school?" Betty found voice to inquire.

"For a variety of reasons. The principal, Miss Ketcham, is her niece. Miss Wynne was a schoolmistress herself for forty years, and was an assistant in the Twinbridge High School when I fitted for college. Afterwards she founded the Ridge School, which has grown rather famous in this neighborhood. Now that she has retired she prefers to live in it still. Miss Sarah Wynne loves young girls, though that, too, she never talks about. I object to their being so much in her room, however. I have arranged with her that when I send up my card, girls shall be cleared from the passageway."

"How would this afternoon please you?" asked Mr. Tuckerman, as they rose from the table. "Are you comfortably settled in your rooms? It was Miss Wynne who helped me to furnish them."

"We think our rooms are perfectly beautiful," said the spokesman Lucy, "but we think you ought n't to give up so much of the house to us."

Their uncle, sitting in his study, had hearkened to the chatter and laughter from above with deep relief. The sorrowful young figures he had encountered the day before had at first depressed him. An hour after the arrival, he had wondered if youth were indeed so light that these very girls were dancing about above his head, and to say the least, were making a healthy amount of noise.

"It 's all so funny, and so pretty, and so different!" They had been accustomed to the scale of the prairies; they had lived where quaintness was unknown; and they went about their uncle's small old house with laughter and delight.

"Now is the time for homesickness," he thought with dread, and retreated to his books, feeble to cope with it. But no; the young things were absorbed in discovering tiny old cupboards high in the wall, trying deep window-seats, exclaiming over their sitting-room fireplace. Its black iron and brass mountings were what they had never imagined, from their experience of mantels in chocolate marble.

"I wish there was a secret panel," said Betty, lowering her voice.

"The prettiest thing is the corner cupboard in the dining-room, and the mate to it in the library," they reported to their amused uncle.

"The 'bowfat,' they used to call it," he corrected them. "What shall we make of your sitting-room?" he continued.

"We brought our sewing-machine," said Lucy, "but not much besides. It could stand in the east window."

Her uncle looked a little blank: he had fancied a flowering plant by that window. "Do girls sew nowadays?" he asked mildly.

"They do unless they are rich," Lucy answered earnestly. "But it is the only way, Uncle Ellery, to take a real interest in your clothes. Women miss half the fun who don't."

"Is that possible? Have you brought your books?" he inquired further.

"They were mostly schoolbooks: we got books from the library."

"I arranged those shelves —"

"We can hang curtains on them," suggested Lucy

quickly, "and then we can put anything — boxes and work-baskets — on them."

"No," said her uncle, feeling that the time had arrived for education to begin. With an effort that amounted to heroism, he said, "You shall look over my library, and whatever books you would like to read you shall take to your own shelves."

"Oh, Uncle Ellery, may we?" cried Frances, springing to her feet. "May we do it to-day?"

"If I need to borrow any of them from you, I shall feel at liberty to do so. This morning I must go to my lecture. In the afternoon, if you are so disposed, we will visit Miss Wynne."

Tuckerman had already several matters which he wished to lay before Miss Wynne. What could be done for his nieces' speech? They all spoke too fast, and their r's were abominable They moved their pretty heads too much as they talked: what would cultivate repose in Lucy and Frances? If Frances would merely sit or stand or walk, it would gratify him, but her constant variations of these simple acts disturbed his quiet. As for Betty, there was but a suspicion of a fault in her as yet. She had cried out with joy when she saw marmalade on the breakfast table, and ate considerably more than the conventional spoonful. She hung about the kitchen, but he did not yet suspect her motives.

It was fortunately but a short distance to the Ridge. Tuckerman's first appearance in public with his nieces was an ordeal that he knew was before him; but he would rather postpone an encounter with Partridge until he was more at ease in his new responsibilities. The

party walked awkwardly: Tuckerman at first drove his nieces ahead of him, then they went all in a bunch, then straggled uncomfortably, Tuckerman ahead with Betty, the two others behind. In vain he tried to keep step with any of them, even when Betty slid her hand into his. He strode ahead, dragging her along.

"Oh, Lu, it is so different from the way we went with papa to the Park. Papa knew how." Frances' lip quivered, and Lucy said nothing.

"Don't seat them in a row like a class, Ellery," Miss Wynne entreated, as Tuckerman placed chairs for his three charges. "Do they know that this is the room in which Coverdale wrote? Show your girls the photograph of the room as he left it. That chair was his — the only thing I have. You shall each sit in it before you go. Walk about and look at anything you like."

Miss Wynne's room was filled with the small, precious trophies of a life of culture: mementos of travel that could be carried in a shawl-strap; souvenirs of "occasions" that stood out in her life; portraits and autographs of famous people. There was nothing of "great purchase;" but there was much that was priceless to the imagination, that kindled trains of memory, and enriched the days of the imprisoned woman.

"There is his likeness," said Miss Wynne. "I chose a picture of him as he looked the only time that I saw him — when he was young, and I was younger. He died before I came to Twinbridge. He looked the genius that he was."

"Yes," breathed Frances in reply, lost in the mystery and beauty of the young poet's face. This was romance — this was the world of her dreams.

"Did he speak to you?" she asked in a low, rapturous voice.

"No; I met him in a narrow lane, and I looked at him and he looked at me, though I was only a little girl in a sunbonnet. I am glad I have it to remember."

"You have n't seen the new final volume," asked Tuckerman, "in which they have gathered up the last fragments of his writing? They do not add to his fame, but some have a personal interest. I will send you the book. Be sure you read 'The Sunbonnet.'"

Miss Wynne's delicate face flushed. The girls were wild with delight.

"When I became the head of a school, Ellery, I looked to it that my young girls saw distinguished people from time to time. They should have the romance of it in their youth."

Miss Wynne, sitting in her great chair, pointed out one object and another, connecting each with some fair experience.

"Oh," sighed Betty, "I never saw anybody that had had so many good times." Miss Wynne's worn, fine face lighted, for Betty had given the sympathetic touch that makes the "good times" perfect.

Lucy's sympathy, on the other hand, was for the suffering woman. She could not think of objects of art or mementos of travel when one so stricken sat before her.

"And now, Betty, tell me about your good times," said Miss Wynne cheerily.

"We have n't had any lately."

Lucy interrupted, for nothing sad, she thought, must ever come near Miss Wynne. She broke in with, "You have such a lovely view into the garden, have n't you?"

It was said in a crude, sudden way; but Miss Wynne saw the fine manners that underlay the speech.

"Do you see any girls?" she asked. "The view requires girls."

"I see young ladies in white dresses and pink dresses," said Betty. "And I see a sun-dial. I never saw one before. If I could get down there, I could find out what time it is."

The old schoolmistress smiled, recognizing the type of mind. "Down the stairs quick, then, and you will find the door at the foot." Betty gave her a bright look, and was off.

Frances still sat in the poet's chair, but Tuckerman stood with Lucy in the window. Betty held up five fingers.

"So late!"

Three lovely young ladies gathered about Betty, and engaged her in conversation. They caught the little girl's hands, and danced her around the sun-dial.

"Hear Betty laugh! Frances is perfectly happy, too, talking with Miss Wynne about distinguished people. She says it gives her thrills."

"Why don't you take them all down to the garden, Ellery?"

Tuckerman refused, and the girls went by themselves without a sign of shyness or reluctance. Their uncle looked after them.

"You are thinking that they will be able to meet the world, all of them," said Miss Wynne. "Is that Western?"

"Partly, no doubt. But they have been through a great deal; they have done so many harder things than to go down into your garden!"

"I wonder what you will make of them."

"Oh, I shall not have much to do with it. They will do it themselves."

"You will have the chance to mould Frances and Betty, but Lucy appears to me formed. Something has aged the girl,—you see it in her tender, care-taking look. She must learn to grow young."

"I was thinking of sending her to college."

"Don't do it, Ellery."

"I shall try to give them all the education they will take."

"I may be wrong, but I think Lucy is a finely disciplined girl already; she has had a higher education, — I rather think the highest, Ellery. As for culture, she will always be respectable, because she has sense and modesty. I found that out as she was looking about this room. How girls take my varied possessions tells me a great deal. The truth is, I am an old woman now: I don't love people according to their high percentages. I am sorry your Lucy will not have all the joys of the intellectual life, yet she will have as much happiness as is her share, if I read her heart aright. Don't torment her with college, Ellery. She has not had the preparation."

"Can you make anything of the shy, silent one?"

"Shy—silent? Not Frances? You are mistaken, my dear friend. She is the most difficult girl of the three, and I should think, the most gifted. Betty, however, has solid qualities. She is a sturdy little creature mentally, and her arms and legs are as stout as her mind. It is almost a pity she was n't a nephew."

"Three girls!" sighed Tuckerman.

"I won't belittle your task. It appears to amuse some of your friends, but you can depend upon me to take it seriously. It has its lighter side, to be sure. Mrs. Horace Tuckerman called on me yesterday. She thinks it likely that you will spoil the girls. I told her they were more liable to coddle you. Lucy will try to be a mother to you, I see that. Don't allow it: you must save that privilege for a wife."

"Lucy has mended my coat lining already."

"I told you so."

"Do you suffer to-day?" asked Tuckerman suddenly.

"Only when I move. Sitting still, I'm like Hosea Biglow: 'I half-forgit I've got a body on.' The real me is so separate, so different, from this body that cumbers me. Ah, dear Ellery, I have 'intimations of immortality.' I seem to myself a proof of it."

Tuckerman bowed his head and said nothing. They presently returned to the nieces.

"I have no definite plans for them yet, Miss Wynne. The chief business for the moment appears to be our getting acquainted."

"You must love each other before anything can really begin."

Tuckerman sighed incredulously.

V

SUNDAY

"Is church at a quarter before eleven or eleven, Uncle Ellery?" asked Lucy at breakfast, in the clear, rapid voice that made her uncle answer with careful slowness.

"Well, I hardly know. I believe a quarter before eleven."

"What time do you have to be ready?"

Tuckerman looked up apprehensive. If he disliked on any occasion the conspicuousness of going to church, he doubly disliked such publicity on the first Sunday of his nieces' presence in Twinbridge. Decidedly, he would not go out of complaisance; and most assuredly, he would not be carried there against his will.

"The meeting-house is very near, just across the common," he answered.

Lucy said no more.

Tuckerman had passed through several phases of thought since the early days when, on a Sunday morning, his mother had held him firmly by the hand till she placed him in the pew on the middle aisle. Sentiment for her led him to hold the pew still in his name, but it was a seat the ushers could depend upon for the use of strangers.

Whether his three nieces expected him to escort them to church he could not tell. From what he had learned

of them, he foresaw that they would be quite capable of taking their own way across the common, and, in their energy and inexperience, of thinking nothing about it. He fancied the three young black-robed figures walking up the aisle, with all Twinbridge eyes upon them; and he felt the indecency of allowing them to go alone. There was but one thing to be done: he was standing by the door, submissively drawing on his gloves when Lucy came down the stairs. She gave him a loving, unquestioning look, and summoned her two sisters.

There was a distinguished foreigner at church that day, and also a local bride; but the attention of the congregation wandered from these to the Tuckerman pew. At the head sat Lucy, sweet-faced and absorbed, as her grandmother had sat there forty years ago. Frances glanced hither and yon, with eager eyes, and fidgeted throughout the service, to her uncle's displeasure. He was still further embarrassed when Betty fell asleep, and, toppling over, settled her head comfortably against his arm. Tuckerman sat bolt upright and listened to the sermon with exaggerated attention. "The young fellow has some ideas; he is not a twaddler," was his inward comment, but he objected to the manner of giving out the hymns, and of making the parish announcements: it lacked polish, decidedly. That part of church-going which Tuckerman particularly disliked, however, was what followed the benediction. The Twinbridge congregation was most friendly and cordial, shook hands to the right and left, and overflowed with kind inquiries. Progress down the aisle was slow. Tuckerman perceived to-day a murmer of mingled curiosity and congratulation as he left his pew.

"You have your nieces with you, Mr. Tuckerman," said one of the ladies in summer silks.

"I see your nieces have arrived," and another bowed and smiled.

"So your nieces have brought you to church," said one ill-advised matron; and continued with persistent folly, "How did you like the sermon?"

One or two succeeded in shaking hands with him. The girls lagged behind, frankly examining the old New England meeting-house, an edifice they had known before through pictures in their admirable school-books.

"Don't they know that people are looking at them?" their uncle was asking himself impatiently. He could not tell whether the unconsciousness of his nieces meant innate superiority or crude obliviousness of other people. That they were not New England girls was borne in upon him. He kept far enough away from Lucy, Frances, and Betty to get rid of introductions, a most objectionable feature of church vestibules. He finally marshaled his charges down the walk and across the common in a very ungenial frame of mind. Betty gave a hop-skip-and-jump, expressive of release, and seized hold of his hand, in sight of several interested ladies.

"It's very amusing," said one.

"It makes me want to cry," another answered.

"Poor Ellery Tuckerman!"

"Poor little girls!"

"How well I remember their mother! The oldest girl is the image of her."

There had been a few words in the young minister's

sermon that lingered in Tuckerman's mind all day, and so fulfilled the purpose of a sermon. When he set forth again with his nieces to attend upon Mrs. Horace Tuckerman's Sunday night tea, it was in a much kindlier temper.

In Mrs. Horace's mind there was a connection between Sunday and doing one's duty by one's relatives. On that day she disposed of family letters and family company ; and consequently on Sunday felt more strongly than ever her own excellence. She had a self-confident piety, and set her face towards the sermon with an expression of perfect serenity, sure that she should hear herself commended and neighboring sinners chastised. It was with a sense of her own solid worth that she led the three nieces into her front parlor.

"Come here, Gus, and be introduced to your cousins."

Gus looked as if it were considerable trouble, but slowly lounged across the room. Tuckerman freely called his only nephew a lout; but tried to remember that a hobbledehoy at thirteen may turn out a Chesterfield. Gus certainly as yet manifested none of "the graces" as he shuffled up to the girls and reluctantly shook hands with them.

"We saw you at church to-day," began Mrs. Horace amiably. "Did n't you feel like the head of a family?"

"I have n't analyzed my feelings yet."

"We never see you there except when Aunt Plummer visits you," Mrs. Horace continued.

The girls all looked at their uncle.

This is religious persecution, said Tuckerman to

himself, and he stood out against it. "What do you hear from Aunt Plummer?" he inquired firmly. "And how are the Crewens — Cousin Olivia, and the rest of 'em?" This was the level of conversation at family gatherings, in Tuckerman's opinion, and one might as well get down to it at once. "These are your relatives, too," he explained to his nieces. "You'd better learn all you can about them."

Mrs. Horace saw much to criticise in Aunt Plummer's conduct of her affairs; and thought most of the Crewens were in a bad way. The girls wished they knew the Crewens, if they did such interesting things; and concluded that Aunt Plummer must be the flower of the family.

"But I should make an effort to get acquainted with these young ladies," said their Aunt Laura agreeably, and moved her chair squarely in front of them. "Now won't you tell me all about Chicargo?" she asked, looking at the three at once.

"It is n't the least bit like Twinbridge," said Betty, because words failed her two sisters.

"I should think probably not," observed Mrs. Horace dryly. "I have n't seen Chicargo myself."

Tuckerman, to his own surprise, flew to the defense of his nieces. "I am told the city has its beauties."

"I'd like ter see those stockyards." Gus came forward and addressed the company.

"Ugh!" cried Frances, "I hope you don't think we have anything to do with stockyards."

"I'd like ter see 'em kill fifty or sixty hogs a minute!"

"Gus!" shrieked his mother. "Where have you ever heard of such things?"

"We live on the North Side," said Lucy gently, but the value of this fact was lost on Mrs. Horace.

"I believe that is something like saying, 'We live in Boston,'" Frances explained.

Their aunt looked perplexed. "I should not suppose Chicargo was in any way to be compared with Boston."

"It 's much nicer," said Frances composedly. "Such narrow, crooked little streets I never saw in my life. So stuffy!"

"What do you refer to, pray?" asked Mrs. Horace. "Boston stuffy?"

"You see Frances comes from the best ventilated city in America," her uncle defended her: "the Windy City, do you call it?"

"Some people do," said Frances coldly.

Lucy, with an idea that Frances was behaving badly, tried to give some real information about her native city, and was imparting it to Mrs. Horace's uncomprehending ears when supper was announced.

"Gus, wait, — wait, I say, — and escort your eldest cousin to the dining-room. Give her your arm."

Gus came back and stuck out his elbow at Lucy, without looking at her, and set off at a round pace.

"Place Lucy's chair for her, Gus, and seat her at the table," continued his mother. Gus shoved his cousin under the table with all his strength, and the glasses jumped to his satisfaction.

"Don't sprawl, Gus dear," said his mother.

"Sit up, Gus," and his uncle gave him a thump on the back.

It was a table of some elegance at which they seated

themselves. The polished mahogany was laid with lace doylies; the silver tea service and delicate china gleamed in the light of shaded candles. Mrs. Horace had said kindly, "I shall have out my best for them. All such things are an education to girls who have had few opportunities. They form their manners."

The supper was itself of an elegance to correspond. Exquisite but tiny Parker House rolls and small balls of butter; ramekins containing a dainty unknown mixture, — a salad of which the guests discreetly helped themselves to as little as possible; then half a peach deliciously preserved, and a small square of cake. Finger bowls appeared and the supper was over.

Meanwhile, four hungry young people looked up and down the table for what they might devour, but were mocked with cut glass and silver. Gus, intrenched behind a spreading candlestick, had whispered to the maid, "Say, get us a plateful; put 'em in front o' me." He gave one roll to Betty, and the rest went down before him with such speed that he was the first to rise from the table.

"Gus, you should *never* hurry, either to the table, or at the table, or from the table."

The party returned to the front room. In doing so, Mr. Tuckerman just saved himself from falling on his sister-in-law's polished floor, and giving the rug a kick, he took up a book and buried himself in it.

"I hear you have visited the home of Coverdale already," said Aunt Laura, engaging the nieces in conversation again. "I presume that is not a kind of thing you are able to do in Chicargo."

"We have two hundred poets in Cook County,"

said Frances. "But Indiana is the literary centre since Boston died out."

"Boston—died — " gasped Mrs. Horace Tuckerman, and Lucy said with all haste, "We 've got nicely settled in these two days, Aunt Laura."

"How many trunks did you bring?"

The number was very modest.

"Oh, yes, wearing black, of course, you don't need much. You will be quiet for a while."

The girls were silent.

"What did you do with the rest of your things?"

"We had n't many," answered Lucy, with whom this was the tenderest subject, hardly to be spoken of without tears.

"How did you dispose of your furniture and pictures and carpets?"

Lucy could not speak.

"We stored them," said Frances, "in case we should wish to go back to Chicago."

Their aunt pursued her inquiries: "How is Maggie conducting herself? Has she begun to show any signs of leaving?"

"Maggie cried when she saw us," said Betty. "I guess it was our black dresses."

Mrs. Horace looked doubtful as to that. "You must make Maggie keep her place. She has had control so long, she fancies she is mistress of the house."

"I don't think I am very good at making people keep their places," Lucy laughed.

"It 's Maggie that will make us keep ours," said Frances. "She wants to make ladies of us."

"We are used to doing things for ourselves,"

added Lucy with great dignity. "Why, where is Betty?"

Betty had at last responded to frantic gesticulations of Gus, and had slipped into the dining-room, and thence had followed him to regions beyond. Gus made for the pantry without words or signs. "There, eat that," he said. "She always has those little tubs when we have company: I could eat six!"

Betty, feeling desperately wicked, seated herself on a sugar bucket, and ate cake and preserves.

"I always do," said Gus nonchalantly. "I guess the others'd like to, if they dared. I thought you were so little they would n't miss you."

"What will your mother say?"

"She won't have to know. They're talkin' for dear life. What do folks talk about, anyway, — girls and ladies that talk all the time? My mother does. If you can keep 'em talkin', you can do 'most anythin'. They won't miss us."

"Lucy will," said Betty, solemnly eating her cake crumbs.

"I'll hide you behind the flour barrel."

"It's awful, when you are at a tea party. You are n't, Gus, you are just at home. It's your cake; but I'm only a visitor."

Betty had a growing sense of guilt, when voices were heard in the dining-room. She could easily have hidden, but she reasoned that search would be made, and sooner or later she must account for herself. Honesty was the best policy, was Betty's quick decision. The situation was painful for a self-respecting little girl of ten caught in the pantry when visiting.

Steps approached; experience surely guided Mrs. Tuckerman.

"She won't scold you," whispered Gus; "I'm the one to catch it. Eat that quick!"

Mrs. Tuckerman appeared in the doorway; Lucy and Frances, behind her, joined in the search for their sister.

"Augustus, what are you doing?"

"Eatin'."

"What is Betty doing?"

"Eatin'. She was, anyway."

"Why, little sister!" Lucy tried her best to make her voice sad.

Betty swallowed, but said not a word.

"I am very much surprised," Mrs. Horace continued, "very much surprised indeed! Is this your idea of entertaining company, Gus?"

"Yes 'm," said Gus. "They'd like some, too;" and he jerked his head toward his young lady cousins.

"Oh, do give us some!" cried Frances, already named by Mrs. Horace "the pert one."

"Betty, how could you?" and Lucy drew her sister away. "Can it be that my little girl is greedy?"

"I guess it is, or else hungry," answered Betty humbly.

"It was fortunate Uncle Ellery was so absorbed in a book."

"Not very polite to read right through everything when you are out for a visit," said Frances. "It was because he was in such a rage at that slippery floor. I heard him say slippery floors were a breach of hospitality."

"I think it is time to go home if it has come to this," said Lucy, still holding Betty's hand.

"I supposed Betty knew how to behave, if I did n't," Frances giggled. "I was the one to get into the pantry scrape! I wish I had. Gus, are you going to see me home? I should like that boy, Lucy, if he were n't so fat," she whispered.

VI

THE FIRESIDE

THE long June twilight still lingered, though dinner had been over a half-hour ago. Tuckerman was wont to remain behind as the family rose from the table, and to make no suggestion to his nieces. He intended to leave them their liberty in the smallest matters, and refrained even from proposing that they should go into the next room. Hence each in her own way concluded that Uncle Ellery cared very little what became of them when a meal was ended. Usually after dinner they sauntered with arms intertwined to the open doorway, and stood there watching the village street, or they sat upon the doorsteps, as in Chicago days. Their uncle found it highly distasteful to group himself with a bevy of nieces upon his front steps. He retreated to his library, and lighted his reading-lamp.

On this night, the girls had remained but a moment at the door. They had shivered in their white gowns, for it was one of those rare days in June when the night is raw and damp.

Mr. Tuckerman was still reading as they went up the stairs. They wished not to interrupt him; he wished not to interfere with their freedom. He heard them moving about in their sitting-room above. Then all was still. Tuckerman laid down his book, and listened for laughter and chatter. He went to the door of his library,

and then to the foot of the stairs. He began to be faintly sorry that he had made it so clear to his nieces that the sitting-room was their domain, and the library his. Nevertheless, he closed the door, to convince himself of the wisdom of such an arrangement. It occurred to him that the night was chilly, and he touched a match to the kindlings laid upon the andirons. Still he listened for sounds from overhead, and his vague discomfort increased. Unreasonably enough, he felt neglected, and allowed himself some hard thoughts of his nieces. Youth was heartless, he reflected. To have known the sorrow these girls had known, and to recover with such buoyancy! Did they ever think of the tragedy that had hastened their mother's death? And once more Tuckerman mourned for the little nephew he had lost. How often did those laughing girls remember their mother, or their father?—an amiable fellow, by all accounts,—no doubt they had loved him. He thought more gently of his brother-in-law than ever before, taking his part against these light-hearted daughters. After all, Tuckerman continued, women were much alike; young or old, they were easily diverted, quickly absorbed in trifles, children of a larger growth.

The house was as still as in the years before the arrival of the sisters. Tuckerman had no need to fear that his studies would be interrupted. Here lay his books about him; here were leisure and quiet as before; a calm evening stretched before him. Yet he read uneasily, and his mind was restless. "It is as if I were not in the house, or as if they were not; yet we are a family, or trying to be. We might as well be boarders. This is hardly what is meant by a fireside."

A thought struck him: if he felt the need of a fire this chilly June evening, probably his nieces might also. The country maidservant has a perpetual evening out, and Mr. Tuckerman must inquire for himself.

The door of the girls' sitting-room was closed, and their uncle knocked with some hesitation. There was no response for a few seconds, and he felt a vague alarm. At last Lucy opened the door upon a room in darkness.

"O Uncle Ellery!" she said with breaking voice. A sob from Frances came from the gloom, and Betty began to cry afresh.

Tuckerman would gladly have turned and fled, but summoned all his courage. "Have you a fire laid? You need a fire this cold evening."

"We don't want a fire, Uncle Ellery," and Lucy's voice failed her. "You see," she faltered, "we have to cry sometimes. We don't want you to be troubled by it; you must n't mind us."

"We don't need any fire," came Frances' voice, heavy with tears. "Betty, cry all you want to, darling."

"No wonder, no wonder," said Tuckerman from the bottom of his heart.

"You understand, Uncle Ellery," said Lucy, controlling herself. "You won't blame us? You won't be made unhappy by it?"

"Unhappy! Of course I'm unhappy if you are!" Tuckerman saw in a flash that his life and the lives of his nieces had become bound up together: that was "family life," that was the "fireside." "For better, for worse" binds all families, — not alone those that are founded at the altar. Tuckerman recognized the begin-

ning of that play of life upon life, of character upon character, which unites human beings.

"You are so kind," repeated Lucy, "but won't you go away and not mind us?"

"No, Lucy, you children belong to me now. I shall not leave you here in the cold and the dark. Whatever happens to you now concerns me, and we must bear things together." This was a remarkable speech, and startled the girls so much that they stopped crying.

"You did n't know father: how could we expect you to care?"

"But I knew your mother. Come down to the library, and I will show you some old photographs of your mother. You shall see how she looked when she was your age. Come!" He waited for no remonstrances, but went down before them, having put forth his strength.

The girls obeyed him. Frances sat upon the hearth-rug, and clasped her knees and lowered her head, lost in the charm of the flicker and flame. She held a picture of her mother so that the firelight struck it, and looked and looked into the face till it spoke to her.

"I like to watch the fire," said Lucy. "It makes you feel as if you had a home;" and she looked up sweetly at her uncle.

"Light your own always when you fancy it," he urged.

"It's much nicer to sit by yours, Uncle Ellery."

"Sometime we 're going to have afternoon tea in our sitting-room, and invite you," said Betty. "Gus said he'd come." They all laughed. "Blessed be the commonplace," thought Tuckerman; "there's healing in it." A comfortable and low-pitched conversation ran

on for some time. The fire filled the pauses with little sounds of content. Trusting Betty nestled to her uncle, who sat in his big armchair, and actually attained to putting his arm about his little niece.

"You're just like papa," the child said to him so nobody else could hear.

A few minutes later Lucy started to her feet. "Oh, dear, the door-bell! We must go."

"Two rings; Partridge! Sit still. He rings twice and then walks in. It's nobody but Partridge."

"Upon my word!" was all that young man found to say as he stood in the doorway. Frances was still sitting on the hearth-rug; opposite her sat Lucy on a low stool; while Tuckerman's chair faced the fire, and Betty perched upon its arm. There was only the light of the flaming wood, and of a softly shaded lamp.

"A more charming family group I've never seen," said the guest. "Don't move. I'll look at you, and then I will go home."

"Draw up, Partridge. Help yourself to a chair."

Frances jumped to her feet, and Lucy moved back.

"I could n't do it," said Partridge. "It's too perfect a picture of domestic happiness. No outsider ought to mar it."

"Mr. Partridge is always joking," announced Betty. "He can't help it."

"It's because he is shy," said his friend Tuckerman.

"That's a fact," said Partridge earnestly. "This is the first time I have felt at ease with you ladies."

"Then pray sit down, sir!" Frances made room for him. Partridge took it upon himself to mend the fire, and laid on another stick.

True enough, Tuckerman's friend had had no great success in making acquaintance with the nieces. There were so many of them, he had told their uncle; for he still dropped in late of an evening. "You can't talk to three at once, all different."

"I thought you were great at that — you a rising politician."

Partridge had grinned.

"Here's a month gone by, and you never come to the house until they've disappeared. You promised to take a hand in developing my nieces. I want them to see all kinds of people."

"Many thanks!"

"I am much obliged to your mother for calling upon my girls."

"Mother's the right sort. Might have done a better job bringing me up, perhaps."

"You'll do pretty well, Partridge," — so his older friend had expressed a deep affection. "Don't abandon me, at any rate, even if you don't hit it off with my nieces."

The girls had made their own observations. They peeped over the balusters when he entered the house at ten o'clock, and they heard the br-br-br of masculine voices below stairs, till they had learned to fall asleep to the distant murmur.

"I suppose he thinks us too young to be worth his notice," said Frances. "He is exactly thirty, his mother told us. That old lady means to protect her son. She came to inspect us, and let us know we were not to look that way. She impressed upon us our youth, and his age and importance; asked us about school, and told us

he was chairman of the selectmen. She thinks she's artful."

"We are never likely to see him," said Lucy composedly.

But here was Mrs. Partridge's son sitting with them in such intimacy that nobody thought it worth while to talk. Neither uncle nor nieces could forget how the evening had begun. The girls sat subdued but not unhappy, feeling a new, indefinable nearness to their uncle, now that a stranger had joined them. Tuckerman put his arm around little Betty, and her small frame stirred the fatherliness in him, so touching it appeared in its helplessness contrasted with the energy of her spirit. "His little girl" was a tender thought he carried henceforth with him. The others were farther away in their young-ladyhood. Yet the dark circles under Frances' eyes, and the traces of grief and weeping showed him that he had seen into new depths. The sweet patience in Lucy's face meant more to him since that night.

Partridge felt that something was going on beyond his sight and called himself a blundering dolt to have come in upon whatever it might be. He fell into the mood of the rest, without quite knowing what it meant, — that being his nature. Friendship for these three girls was quietly taking hold of Partridge. They had had some great moment, he could see, and it had left them unconscious of themselves, but with a new attraction and meaning.

"How still we are!" said Lucy. "I'm afraid it is very dull for Mr. Partridge. Betty is asleep. Your arm must ache, Uncle Ellery."

Partridge rose suddenly, and said good-night.

VII

NEIGHBORS

MR. TUCKERMAN had once suggested to the editor of the local paper that he should prefer not to have his own affairs appear among the village personals. The young man had thus far respected the request. But having once beheld the three strangers in the Tuckerman pew, he could not refrain from an item: "The three Misses Bell, formerly of Chicago, have arrived in town, and are to reside with their uncle, Mr. Ellery Tuckerman." No one gave the writer credit for the restraint he had put upon himself, and for the severe cutting of his paragraph. Mr. Tuckerman subscribed to the paper because he always had subscribed, and because Maggie devoured it. He himself never saw the sheet. He was quite unprepared for the excitement among his nieces when they found themselves in print. He became a trifle uneasy lest they might have a taste for notoriety, — "keeping out of the papers" being in his code the aim of a lady or gentleman.

"Look, Uncle Ellery! Oh, *read* it, Uncle Ellery!" cried Betty.

"Ah," said Mr. Tuckerman.

"We shall cut it out and keep it," Lucy declared. "Except perhaps our marriages or deaths, it 's the most important thing in our lives. I shall send a copy to Mr. Daggett."

Frances was excited, but her face was hard to read.

So the fact was carried to outlying farmhouses of Twinbridge, to the clerks in the village stores, to the factory girls at the end of the town.

Twinbridge society, however, was interested in the nieces for the uncle's sake. He enjoyed an esteem in the community which was partly the Tuckerman inheritance, and partly won for himself. Unfamiliarity breeds deference; moreover, the town was accustomed to eccentric people who went their own way. Indeed, he was its own product, and it was more proud of him than impatient. Mr. Tuckerman's nieces were at once recognized as young persons of some consideration, though, on their own account, of uncertain value. They were, at all events, to be called on scrupulously by mothers and daughters.

Twinbridge was a superior town, but it had its moments of descent to the common level, and gossiped quite like any other village. "It rather throws Mrs. Horace out of her calculations," said one excellent lady. "Gus was to be his uncle's heir, and those distant nieces were to come off with a legacy, — that was her plan, I take it. Everybody seems to be sure Ellery Tuckerman will never marry."

"These girls are lucky that they can count on that," the neighbors replied. "If ever a man was born for bachelorhood! This descent of the nieces is a sort of retribution."

"May it work out his salvation!"

"You think he is selfish?"

"How could he help but be? However, he will be good to these nieces, — I'm sure of it."

"As good as he knows how to be; but what can he know about such young creatures? They will have to take care of themselves."

"Other girls will take care of them; my daughters are going to see them."

"Mrs. Horace called at our house yesterday. She told us how fond his uncle was of Gus, how much he thought of the representative of the name, and of continuing the family in the town. This was all to my poor husband."

"What did he say?"

"After she was gone? I will tell you: —

> "Where yet was ever found the mother
> Who'd change her booby for another?

My husband does n't say much."

"Is that boy altogether a booby?"

"He's merely a spoilt child turning into a big boy. But his uncle seems to agree with my husband."

These two ladies soon called upon the nieces, and the young lady daughters, and the little girls. Indeed, feminine Twinbridge was not a little pleased with the opportunity to see Mr. Tuckerman's establishment. Only when Aunt Plummer came to town did female foot, save Maggie's, cross the threshold. Now Twinbridge ladies penetrated to the sitting-room in the upper story, and were usually, in a burst of confidence, shown the flowery bedrooms.

Even in this self-restrained New England village there was the gushing caller, the little widow who purred pleasant things to all her acquaintance. Mr. Tuckerman became instantly silent on the approach of this lady;

but she persisted in praising him to his nieces. She loved finery, whether of clothes or language. "Such wealth of ideas! Such command of language! Twinbridge follows his career with pride."

"Bah!" said Mr. Tuckerman rudely, when the delighted girls repeated this speech.

"Dear me! Has Uncle Ellery a career?" they cried. "We never heard of it."

Whereupon the visitor extolled their uncle's modesty. "A shyness, a shrinking, I observe whenever I speak to him. It is the same with the young minister: the same shyness, the same difficulty, when he has called upon me. One is forced to talk one's self."

The girls were much impressed by the lady's use of "one:" it gave an air to her conversation.

"One finds it charming, this diffidence on the part of men one may call truly great."

"Oh!" said the girls.

"Has the minister called upon you? No? With his shyness, it may prove an ordeal for both. You will have to talk."

"Oh, we'll talk, all three!" said Frances joyfully.

"I suppose you see a great deal of your aunt? Mrs. Horace Tuckerman is a very superior person, — a very able woman." They imagined that they were patterns of discretion when they all looked pleasant and intelligent in reply, but said not a word.

Their visitor contrived to reach Mrs. Tuckerman's own door, to round out her afternoon. "I have just called upon your lovely nieces, — such a picture, the three young creatures, all in white."

Mrs. Tuckerman gave way to irritation. "A mon-

strous amount of ironing, — I wonder any girl will stay."

"They confided to me — the sweet young things — that they ironed their gowns themselves."

"They must have been very talkative," said Mrs. Horace stiffly.

"They showed me the little old-fashioned bedrooms — sweetly pretty, sweetly pretty!"

"H-m-m," replied Mrs. Horace.

Several little girls were sent by mammas to make acquaintance with Betty. These young callers, out of sight of their mothers, varied considerably in behavior. Little Miss Mary McIntyre merely sat on the edge of a chair and looked at Betty and did not cease to look at her for half an hour.

"I did n't like that Alice Moore," said Betty at dinner. "When I said I was from Chicago, she just made up a face."

"Rude child!" said her uncle gravely.

"It's Edith Hall I just love." A violent friendship with Edith Hall provided for Betty's happiness for several weeks. It was a relief to her uncle, who felt least of all able to answer for the content of a ten-year-old niece. In his inexperience he fancied the older girls easier to make happy. He watched with amusement the mysteries of female friendship as exemplified by Betty and Edith: the haste to see each other, the whispered secrets, the endless talk.

A sad day came when Betty had plainly been in tears, and when she failed to lead the conversation. For twenty-four hours she and her bosom friend were separated, and Betty was plunged in gloom. No wonder:

she had parted from her best friend, declaring she should never speak to her again, — never in this wide world, — with a sob. Betty bore it as long as she could: then, with a burst of emotion, she strode across the street, found Edith, and thrust into her hand a book-mark of perforated cardboard, with the words in red worsted, "Remember me." Having deposited her coals of fire, Betty turned dramatically upon her heel and marched out of the room. Edith, all tears and repentance, ran after her and hung upon her neck.

The family were dimly aware of these events. "I am glad to see your toothache has left you, Betty," said her uncle with uncommon sympathy.

"It was n't toothache," answered Betty, with importance. "Sometimes you have friends that misunderstand you."

"True; I've had such."

Betty gave his sleeve a little caress, and Tuckerman was sure she was the one of his nieces he should take most comfort in.

In due time the older sisters were called upon by the young ladies of Twinbridge. One of these was patronizing; one was unnecessarily respectful; most of them were "just nice," in the language of the girls. The nicest of them went home to her mother, saying, "They are n't all alike, and they are n't exactly like us; and that is what I like about them."

The three nieces frankly expressed themselves disappointed as days passed, and still the young minister made no call upon his new parishioners.

"I don't blame him," said their uncle. "He's shy."

"Does n't he ever shake hands at the church door?" Lucy inquired.

"Is that the custom where you came from?"

Frances looked vengeful. Yet her uncle supposed that he never criticised the western part of his country in his nieces' hearing.

"I'll bring him round some day under my protection, if you are so anxious to see him. I rather like Mathison. He is one of our college men. The young fellow made a neat speech at the dinner the other night."

"Did you make a speech, Uncle Ellery?" asked Betty at once.

"I don't make speeches."

"You ought to," said the energetic Betty. "You could make a splendid one if you only tried. We know all about you now."

"You don't say so!"

"That lady yesterday told us."

One evening Mr. Tuckerman asked his nieces to come into the library to meet the minister. Lucy shook hands with the visitor reverently; Frances, grudgingly; while Betty rushed at him with her welcome; for there are none so hospitable as children.

It was Mr. Mathison's pastoral custom to begin a visit with painstaking inquiries for relatives far and near; but in this oddly constructed family, he could think of no one but Aunt Plummer to ask after.

"She holds her own; no one better," her nephew replied.

"A remarkable old lady," said the minister. "I was entertained at her house during the conference." Aunt Plummer was a hostess great in her denomination,

and was seldom without a minister at her dinner table. Tuckerman could detect that his aunt had taken a fancy to the young dominie, and at once rated him the higher for it.

With a brief remark about Aunt Plummer, Mr. Tuckerman became silent. If a young man had had the hardihood to set up as a pastor at twenty-seven, let him look to himself, — such was the attitude of his host. Tuckerman sank back in his chair and took his ease, wondering how his nieces would acquit themselves.

Mr. Mathison addressed himself to the eldest, and described to Lucy her great aunt's house, one of the landmarks of Oldhaven. Lucy listened softly and reverently.

"She spoke of you," said the minister. "She said you were to visit her: she has a great desire to see you and your sisters." The minister's eyes rested on Lucy's face; he quite understood Aunt Plummer's desire. "She has just given a new organ to the Oldhaven church, as you probably know."

"Is it as beautiful an old church as yours?" asked Lucy. "You know we have never seen anything old before — not anything before the fire."

"This is your first sight of the East?" said Mr. Mathison, like all the rest of Twinbridge.

"We had never been farther east than Indiana," Lucy laughed.

The minister looked vague; not since his twelfth year had he known how to bound Indiana.

Mindful of his duty, the visitor addressed several remarks to the second sister, and then to the third. By and by he took his leave, and after Tuckerman had closed the door, he apologized a little for his guest. "He

is an intelligent, able fellow, but he talks better, of course, with men."

Nevertheless, beneath its apparent commonplaceness, this hour had been momentous. Two young people had quietly fallen in love with each other, under the very eyes of an observant family. Then and there had begun an idyl of true love that was destined to run smooth.

VIII

PETITIONERS

"FANNY, you and I must talk about something without Betty."

"Betty has more sense than any of us."

"We must not have her think about such things as this. I had to, when I was ten."

"What is this dreadful thing? Tell me quick."

"Fanny, we've been here more than a month now, and I have found out a great deal that I did n't know when I came."

"Dear me! So have I, heaps!"

"One thing is that Uncle Ellery is n't nearly so rich as we supposed he was."

"I 've noticed that," said Frances soberly.

"We ought not to be a burden to him."

"He insisted on our coming here: it is his fault."

"But I can't bear," said Lucy, "to think of his growing all the time a little grayer, and that bald spot a little bigger, just because of us."

"It 's probably good for him," Frances went on, for the sake of argument. "There was the girl in our Sunday-school class that read out very loud, 'Be ye one another's burdens.' All the same, I'd rather not be the burden myself. Perhaps *that 's* selfish, too."

This sounded fanciful to Lucy, who said simply, "It

is plain that Uncle Ellery has old-fashioned ideas about girls: he is what is called conservative."

Frances laughed rebelliously. "I know exactly what *I* am going to do!"

Lucy seized her by the arm, and held her.

"Fanny, I am going to talk with Uncle Ellery, and I wanted you to know about it. He may take care of Betty and send her to school, but you and I are able to look after ourselves."

"I should say we were!"

So it happened that Lucy knocked one day at the study door with her mind set upon a serious interview with her uncle. She had thought over carefully what she was to say, and also what Uncle Ellery would say in reply. She was not far from right in her forecast, for Tuckerman had never shown to this niece his incalculable side. Lucy impelled everybody to deal simply with her. Her uncle had been touched by the gentle patience of the girl, too early sobered. "What can I do?" he had asked Miss Wynne.

"You can do nothing. She will get back her youth: it is not too late. The child has been dulled with care," she continued. "The compensation is in her character: that is not dull. Do you know how often she comes to see me? I was afraid it was kindness; for she cannot conceal that she pities me. But she has succeeded in making me believe that she enjoys my society. I am fond of your Lucy."

"I am afraid I shall interrupt you, Uncle Ellery," said Lucy on this morning.

Always to feel interrupted Tuckerman knew to be a form of selfishness and coldness of heart. It was the

final expression of the unsocial instinct. He had not overcome the feeling with respect to his nieces. Should he ever love them better than his work? — he wondered.

"Come in, come in," he said in what he intended for a jovial tone. Lucy's ear was unsuspicious, and she smiled in reply.

"We have been here six weeks, Uncle Ellery, and the summer is half over. I suppose summer is rather an idle time, but summer does n't last forever, does it, Uncle Ellery?"

"It ought to," answered Tuckerman gayly, though he had his eye on the clock.

"What are we going to do when summer is over?"

"Continue to live in Twinbridge, I hope."

"Oh, I want to," said Lucy ardently. "I think this is the dearest old town, and everybody is so kind. But we wish to work; we wish not to be a burden to you, Uncle Ellery."

"There appears to me work for you to do in pursuing your education, Lucy. Do you regard your education as finished?"

Lucy winced, though the words were kindly spoken.

"I could n't go to school so long as other girls did, there was so much to do at home; and now it is too late. I feel as if I could n't bear to have other girls know how ignorant I am: but you ought to know, Uncle Ellery."

Her uncle was touched, but he could find nothing to say; and Lucy at once drew back. "I want to work," she repeated.

"But you are my housekeeper; how can I spare you?"

"You and Maggie are a great deal better housekeepers than I am."

"You have your younger sisters to look after."

A shade of anxiety passed across Lucy's face. "Fanny won't be looked after: she is determined to be independent. And Betty, — well, it's Betty that looks after us." Lucy laughed.

Tuckerman's eye traveled over his books: so he could always help himself to think.

"I have learned typewriting. I always knew that — something might happen." There was the look of suffering put by, which came into Lucy's face at times. "I knew that I must be ready to earn my living. I learned a year ago, when father began to be sick. I expected to live in Chicago and to go into an office."

Mr. Tuckerman stood up suddenly and walked about the room.

"That would be quite out of the question: that is not to be thought of for a moment."

Lucy waited in silence, a gentle, deprecating silence. "I love to work," she pleaded at last.

"Life would be a tame sort of thing without work, Lucy, — an ignoble thing. But let us consider together. I have my own plans for you. I wish you girls to give me two years to exercise my privilege of guardian. At the end of that time it may be best for you and Frances to support yourselves: I cannot tell now. In the meanwhile I wish you to remain in this home and I wish you to make your chief affair education, — not altogether schooling, but what old New Englanders called 'advahntages.' Lucy, I shall try to carry out your father's wishes, that is all."

Tears stood in the girl's eyes. "But there is so little money," she faltered.

"Never mind money. There are things too important for money to enter into them." This had been her uncle's reasoning all his life, and it had not yet brought him to bankruptcy; probably because he added to such theories the simple and frugal habits of generations of Tuckermans.

"The money is the least part of it. The thing must be done." Such, after all, is the truly magnificent scale of expense.

The prudent Lucy thought it a dangerous principle, as it might well have been in a man of different temperament.

"My immediate plan is this," her uncle continued: "the Ridge is an excellent school; make the most of that for one year."

"You wish me to go to school? I shall be nineteen in September."

"Let us call it forty. You have n't heard of the new movement in education, apparently. You do not know that grown-up people go to school nowadays. They don't give themselves up at eighteen or even at twenty-one. Visit my summer course at the university, and see for yourself. There were two Twinbridge mothers of families studying at the Ridge last winter. If you are forty, Lucy, this is the very moment for you."

Lucy was smiling, but an anxious look returned to her face as she said, "Frances has some plans for herself, Uncle Ellery. Oh, won't you try to persuade her? Betty must go to school, of course. Betty is the bright one of us, you know already."

"Betty will go to college."

Mr. Tuckerman sat down at his desk again, and Lucy rose to go.

"There is an invitation here that I must consult you about," said her uncle; "but there will be time for that when we are all together."

Another knock, and with an effort at patience, Mr. Tuckerman again laid down his pen. Frances entered with an air of preternatural calm. She had even smoothed her hair and laid her ribbons flat. She began with fearful composure, "I came to tell you, Uncle Ellery, what I had made up my mind to do."

Mr. Tuckerman stared.

"As soon as the fall term begins, I am going to New York, to enter the School of Expression."

Her uncle again looked up to the rows of books, for aid to gather his wits. "When — when does the fall term begin?"

"In six weeks."

"In six weeks," Mr. Tuckerman repeated, to gain time.

"You are willing I should go, Uncle Ellery?" said Frances with surprise and with less composure.

"Whom do you know in New York?"

"Nobody yet; but I'm not afraid but I shall find friends. It all depends upon whether you are stiff or not."

Her uncle's face was a study.

"Do you see your way to the financial part of it?"

"I should use my capital, as an investment," said Frances grandly.

"You have your plans quite matured?"

"Oh, yes, I have all the circulars. I have studied it up thoroughly."

"You have talked it over with Lucy?"

The tears rushed to Frances' eyes. "Oh, Uncle Ellery, I love Lucy, but can't you see that Lucy has n't the least particle of the artistic temperament?"

Mr. Tuckerman detested the phrase, but he perfectly understood what had passed between the sisters. His eye wandered once more over his books.

"We must have more talk about this matter, Frances," he said, delaying. "Perhaps you will let me see the circulars."

"It is very good of you to take such an interest, Uncle Ellery."

"I am rather sorry you should wish to leave Twinbridge so soon," he said gently. "Have you given it a fair trial? Of course, I understand how different —"

"Different!" sighed Frances.

"How old are you exactly?"

"I am eighteen in January."

"Meanwhile, I had this letter to-day, which I am to deliver to you and your sisters. Aunt Plummer wishes you to spend a week with her. You might read the letter now."

Frances brightened, instantly diverted. She smiled to herself, then laughed outright, as she handed it back. "*She's* interesting!"

Tuckerman forgave the emphasis, and said kindly, "Take the letter to Lucy, and talk it over. See whether you can go to-morrow."

"So glad to get rid of us!" thought Frances.

"Heigho, Betsey!" she greeted her little sister in the doorway.

"I can't stop," said Betty. "I've got something very important to see Uncle Ellery about."

"This is the third niece to interrupt him. We will go to-morrow and leave him in peace for a week. Sometimes I do pity Uncle Ellery."

"Gus wants me to go with him — oh, may I?" said the breathless Betty, — "over to the place where they make all the electricity, and he knows the man and the man knows everything and the man 's going to tell us everything, and Gus says he 'll take me instead of a boy; and may Gus stay here to luncheon instead of going home? He says he 'd a great deal rather. Oh, please, Uncle Ellery, please can I go?"

"Yes," said Mr. Tuckerman.

IX

AUNT PLUMMER

MRS. HORACE TUCKERMAN was darning her son's stockings. She did this with great patience, considering the fact that Gus frequently took off his shoes only, when wading among the sharp stones in the brook. "Stockin's 're too much trouble to peel, such long ones," he grunted, stooping reluctantly to untie shoe-strings. That he was "hard on stockings" his mother thought evidence of his "vitality." She filled in a capacious hole with a delicate cross-barred pattern, done in single thread, for fear a heavier darn might blister the dear boy's heel. Absorbing as the process appeared, it was far from being all her employment. Her mind was busier than her fingers. It was engaged upon an old theme, which might be named, "Gus's expectations." "Gus's future" had the simplest of definitions in his mother's imagination: money constituted a "future" to her way of thinking. What money could safely be calculated upon, — this problem was Mrs. Horace's occupation. There was Aunt Plummer, aged and childless, holding a large fortune in her own right. She might favor her nephew, Ellery Tuckerman; they always appeared to have a great deal to say to each other: more than that, they laughed together, and Mrs. Horace had a sour dread of laughter's effect upon the sympathies. Hitherto the three little motherless nieces in the West, out of

sight and out of mind, had been a negligible quantity in her calculations.

Aunt Plummer gave her nephew's widow uneasiness because of her religious proclivities. It looked at times as if she might endow her loved denomination. Mrs. Horace's anxiety on this point was so great as to be confided to her brother-in-law. "Those swarms of ministers about her," she lamented, "each one full of suggestions, no doubt. Does n't it make you feel a little uneasy, Ellery?"

Mr. Tuckerman took an unholy pleasure in the uneasiness of his sister-in-law. If her apprehensions had been roused by the ministers, they were redoubled upon the appearance of the nieces. Nothing so dangerous as their advent had threatened Gus's expectations. His mother's meditations this morning were more dismal than ever before. Gus had brought word that a letter from Aunt Plummer had arrived, and that his three cousins were summoned to Oldhaven. Mrs. Horace bit a thread viciously, but said nothing.

"They're gone," Gus continued. "Went this mornin', the whole kit of 'em. I was to the depot." His mother was too perturbed to correct his English. Mrs. Horace had not been informed or consulted, or even bidden farewell. The last was a real grievance, and Lucy, on the train, was already repenting of their rudeness.

"I forgot all about Aunt Laura — that is the simple truth. What dreadful things we do!"

"She'll live, I guess," said Frances.

"She will call it Western. Uncle Ellery ought to have reminded us, but he is so absent-minded, he probably forgot, too."

Mrs. Tuckerman faithfully ran her needle over and then under, over and then under, while her wrath rose steadily. In vain she consoled herself with the reflection, "She will see just what I do, that they are underbred young creatures. Off without saying so much as a word of good-by to me! Gus, I *would n't* chew that tassel."

Tuckerman had supposed that his nieces would shrink from a visit to a stranger aunt, and one so venerable, if not formidable, as Aunt Plummer. Not they! It was a voyage of discovery. Their uncle never jumped at an invitation, but studied excuses till he usually found a presentable one; whereas prompt and delighted obedience to an invitation seemed to mark the character of his nieces.

Nevertheless, the girls on their railway train discussed their probable reception. Gus had called Aunt Plummer "a rare old bird," and had been told by his uncle to mend his manners: his great aunt was one of the superior women of her time. Between the two opinions the sisters were a little at a loss. The old lady's crispness of speech was well known to them, and with all their intrepidity, each one of them a little dreaded the meeting. The badinage of an old lady of eighty-four they had never encountered, and they all grew silent as they approached Oldhaven.

They were met at the station by Aunt Plummer's companion, Miss Rose Allen. She led them soon into a large upper chamber where their great aunt sat holding a book before her. The girls saw a little old lady in a black silk gown. She wore a false front of nut-brown hair, laid smooth over her ears, and a close-fitting cap

of white lace, with flying strings. Over the delicate pink and white of her skin was a network of fine wrinkles, without one deep furrow. Her blue eyes were keen behind her gold-bowed spectacles.

She gave a quick look at the three sisters, and held out both hands to them. "My poor children," she said, "you have had sorrows. The Lord's will be done!" A tear ran down her cheek. "Your mother was my dear niece. She was sweet and good."

"And my father was the best man I ever knew," spoke up little Betty. Frances' lip quivered, and Lucy wiped away tears that would come. This was not the bantering old lady they had prepared themselves to meet.

"But that's not what I invited you here for, — to cry over you, my dears," said Aunt Plummer. "Miss Allen will take you to your rooms, and then you come back to me, and we will be cheerful. We must n't give way, whatever we do."

The sight of new beds and bureaus quickly diverted young minds, and when the girls reappeared in their white gowns, the bright present was back again. Aunt Plummer waited impatiently, — she walked about the room, leaning upon her cane, peering with sharp eyes at one object and another, and murmuring to herself.

"Ha, ha!" she said delightedly, as the three girls entered the room. "Why has n't Ellery Tuckerman been to see me lately?"

"He has been very busy," Lucy apologized, while Frances examined the pictures on the wall.

"Fiddlesticks!" said Aunt Plummer pleasantly. "'Busy' is a foolish word: don't you ever use it. What

has he preferred to me? Books, or some young woman?"

"Oh, not any young lady," Betty answered quickly. "He can't bear young ladies."

"Yes, yes," said Aunt Plummer.

"I think it's we girls that have kept him busy," Lucy answered faithfully. "It must be very new to him."

"No doubt of that," said Aunt Plummer. "I don't complain of your aunt, Mrs. Horace Tuckerman. 'Twas only this week Tuesday she was here, the day I wanted to go to the conference. She came just as I had got into my bonnet. I told her to jump right into the carriage with me, but I don't think she was over and above pleased. There was as good a sermon as I ever heard, from her own minister. I don't think she was over and above pleased, either, when I made him come home to dinner with us. I could see she had something on her mind and wanted to talk. But I must have my afternoon nap, and I left her and the young minister to entertain each other. Come," Aunt Plummer continued, "I want all the family news. Which of you is your Aunt Laura's favorite?"

"Oh, Lucy!" cried the others.

"No," said Lucy, "she thinks we are all Western."

"And what are you, pray?"

"We are proud to be Western," said Frances. "We'd a great deal rather be."

Aunt Plummer looked at her sharply. "Nevertheless, you are Lucy Tuckerman's daughters; that probably modifies you."

"She changed to a Westerner, mamma did," said

Frances earnestly. "I never mean to change into an Eastern woman, never. Lucy has."

Lucy laughed, and Lucy blushed. "Fan and I are always quarreling about that," she said with perfect amiability. "It does n't make a bit of difference if you are only nice. Nice people are just the same everywhere."

Aunt Plummer looked a little doubtful about that. "Your young minister promises well," she said to Lucy. "I like his conservatism," now addressing Betty, who fancied the word, and determined to find out what it meant. "I admire his decorum and his reverence." Aunt Plummer turned next to Frances. "He has a fine sense of propriety in the pulpit. I like neither jokes nor texts out of Browning. He reads the Bible as if it were the Word of God, and not a magazine article. My dear, there was a person in our pulpit not long ago who read one of St. Paul's epistles as if it were a letter from a college chum, and in his sermon, he went out of his way to insult the religion of my forefathers. He was not invited here to dine. I hear this young Mr. Mathison shows good sense in social relations," and she turned again to Lucy; "that he carries himself well with the ladies of the parish, young and old. A trying situation for so youthful a pastor.

"The most astonishing thing I have heard of the young minister," continued Aunt Plummer, "is that Ellery Tuckerman has taken to church-going. How true is that?"

"It's pretty true," said Betty.

"I shall want your uncle's candid opinion. We are thinking of calling Mr. Mathison to our parish. I hear

he has all the new ideas: he can have as much work among foreigners in our town as he can possibly desire. Taking care of these people is the great missionary effort of our age."

Lucy had learned much about her own heart in the last few minutes, through the joy with which she had heard young Mathison's praises, and her dismay at the possibility of his departure from Twinbridge.

"In fact," Aunt Plummer concluded, "we've about decided that we shall have him."

Lucy, quite self-possessed, spoke a word in behalf of Twinbridge. "We have poor people of our own, and some pretty bad people."

"Not in your serene abode of poets and philosophers; I'll never believe it."

"Mr. Mathison has a boys' club, and they're perfectly dreadful," said Betty, coming to Lucy's support.

"I am glad he has got somebody to minister to besides nice young girls in white dresses. Let me hope Gus belongs to his club. The last time I was in Twinbridge he fastened my cap-strings to the back of my chair. I'm rather quick in my movements for one of my age, and when I got up suddenly, my poor head presented a spectacle. 'Why, Gus, why, *Gus!*' was all his mother said. I don't hear quite so well as I did once, though I am not deaf; but that boy talked to me through a thing they call a megaphone. I think I never was treated *quite* in that way before," said Aunt Plummer haughtily. "Does he give any of his valuable time to his new cousins?" she asked.

"We think he is n't very good company for Betty,"

said Lucy anxiously. "There are several nice little girls we should much rather have her associate with."

"I nearly got drowned once, so they don't ever trust me again," Betty remarked in matter-of-fact tones.

"Uncle Ellery fished them both out of the mill-pond," said Frances, giggling. "Such an excitement!"

"The lilies had such tough stems," Betty explained; "and Gus had taken a boat that was n't ours, an old tippy one."

"Uncle Ellery says Gus ought to be sent away from home."

"To a juvenile penitentiary; that's what Uncle Ellery says," Betty added.

"Yet sometimes he's a very decent boy," said Lucy earnestly.

"To be sure," Aunt Plummer agreed with her. "It's his mother. But we won't talk any more about her. Now you can run about the house. It is time for my nap," the old lady said, and dismissed them. "Frances, I'll thank you to draw down the shades. Be sure to leave one so that the cat can watch the passing."

To Lucy's eyes, Aunt Plummer's house had been touched with "the light that never was on sea or land," for had it not been described to her by the young minister? Wondrous power that can hallow with tender association ponderous pieces of mahogany, indifferent paintings in massive frames, heavy china in all the colors of the Orient! This was the house of a merchant prince of Oldhaven, who had flourished in the '40's. It had an air of portly splendor quite different from the spare elegance of colonial times.

In the vast dim parlor the girls drew around a huge

mahogany structure of drawers and cupboards, such as one may see in the coffee-room of an English inn; and out of this were drawn for their delight bronzes and ivory carvings, jades, and porcelains. Their uncle, so the minister had told them, had visited Japan soon after Commodore Perry, and had brought rare objects home when Japan was still a land of mystery and wonder. "And this was the very sword," thought Lucy: not the very sword of an ancient daimio, but that very one of rarest workmanship that the young minister had enlarged upon. Lucy's imagination traveled not to far Japan, but the road back to Twinbridge.

On the other hand, the mystery of the Orient for the first time touched Frances in that New England parlor, — of that past which to Western peoples is "the backward and abysm of time." "See, Betty," she said, to give herself a sense of reality; but Betty was trying to look to the bottom of a Chinese vase that stood three feet six upon the floor.

Aunt Plummer's embroidered chairs and cushions might have been ugly fifty years ago; but time had faded them into beauty. Bowls and jars of flowers lent grace and fragrance to the heavy parlor. On this August morning, the great shaded room, with its cool, dark mahogany and fading colors, had a kind of peace and grandeur that made its impression upon these young strangers.

Across the hall was a smaller room called the library, because it contained a book-case with glass doors. On the shelves were sets of books with handsome backs, which were dusted with great regularity. In the library Aunt Plummer sat to read the newspaper and to go

over accounts with Miss Rose Allen, the old lady having an idea that these were literary occupations, to be carried on in the presence of books.

Aunt Plummer read habitually a morning and an evening paper. A Sunday newspaper was never allowed to cross her threshold. Books were not important to Aunt Plummer: she was too much a woman of affairs; and the affairs of the wide world she regarded as hers. Books, however, had their use: read aloud in Miss Rose Allen's even, agreeable voice they induced naps of deep tranquillity.

"Could I take one out?" asked Betty, spying a volume of Dickens she was longing for. She hardly knew him in half calf. "And may I wait to hear the clock strike?"

Aunt Plummer was popular with children, for in her library hung a cuckoo clock. She had a happy way of sending an uneasy little caller at a quarter before the hour to wait and watch for the cuckoo to appear. Delighted and unsuspecting, the youngster stood first on one foot, then on the other, with eye fixed firm on the tiny door. He screamed with joy when the cuckoo came forth, and ran to his mother and besought her to stay till the half-hour should strike.

From the dining-room the girls descended by a flight of steps to the garden. This was a high-walled city garden, but as commodious as the house it belonged to. A row of shimmering poplars crossed the back and shut out the rear neighbors. Hollyhocks were towering on one side, while on the other an irregular flower-bed was planted with Canterbury bells, larkspur, phlox, and sweet William. Over the blossoms was a flutter of white

butterflies in the August sunshine. Garden seats and a table, with shade in the afternoon, made it altogether a place to take one's ease in.

Aunt Plummer napped from twelve to one and therefore at dinner was fresh as a girl: her eyes shone and her cheeks were pink.

"I am not deaf," said Aunt Plummer. "You have only to speak distinctly and neatly, and that is good for you. My neighbor Mr. Jarvis is deaf as a post," added the old lady, with satisfaction. She continued, however, "I find that if I am to get acquainted with my grandnieces, — and that is what they are here for, — I must take them one at a time. I can't talk with you in a bunch. And that's a piece of advice I give you: don't stick together too much, like those English sisters dressed alike. You must each have a different flower to wear this afternoon — then I can tell you apart."

"We are n't a bit alike," said Betty.

"Your uncle says you are not, but what does a man know about it? The oldest and the youngest shall go to drive this afternoon with Miss Rose Allen, and the middle one shall keep me company at home."

The simple dinner was over at a quarter before two, and every day, at a quarter before two, Aunt Plummer withdrew to the parlor, seated herself by the north window, and called for the backgammon board.

"Can you play backgammon, young lady? No? Then I'll lose no time in teaching you."

Frances was absorbed in learning to place and move her men; for she was trying her best to please Aunt Plummer. She recognized her as a contemporary, the highest tribute a young girl can pay to an elder.

"I see you have a good mind, if you only bring it to bear," said her great-aunt, a little severely. "Your eyes wander."

"It's because I can see the garden."

"You will never be a backgammon-player if you are watching butterflies. Now, bend your mind to it. You will not beat me to-day, nor yet to-morrow: I give you a week. Don't rub your checkers across the board: it wears the leather."

Frances won the third game, with applause from Aunt Plummer, who, nevertheless, showed some chagrin. She muttered, "All doublets," and shut up her padded board with as much of a bang as its luxury permitted. "Is it three o'clock? I play from two to three. Your sisters are to be back at five o'clock. You will all have a glass of milk and a cracker. I go to my room for two hours. Do you take a nap?"

"I never took such a thing in my life," laughed Frances.

"It's the one way to preserve health and beauty."

"Beauty?" thought Frances, glancing brightly at herself in a mirror.

Aunt Plummer was moving with a slow little scuffle of soft slippers towards the stairway. Frances sprang to her side, but dared not offer aid. "I usually have Rose Allen," said Aunt Plummer wearily. "Thank you, dear." The young girl supported her gently up the stairs, while her whole heart went out to old age.

X

A DISCOVERY

THREE months have passed since the night in May when Ellery Tuckerman entered his door laden with new cares. Again he came home to a quiet house, so still that he was restless, and wandered from room to room. One plate was laid in the dining-room, and he turned away from the sight of it. He mounted the stairs to his nieces' sitting-room, sat down there, and looked about him. A small silver thimble had rolled across the floor; Tuckerman called himself a sentimental old fellow that he was so touched by this homely symbol of womanhood, that he could feel the eternal pathos and appeal of the feminine in a foolish silver thimble.

Mere absence, he reflected, what is the secret of its sadness? Is it because the briefest partakes of the long last absence? The world without his laughing nieces! — at the thought, shadows drew in about his heart. By that freak of memory, which is one of the beauties of human nature, he could think of nothing but what was fair and sweet in three human and fallible young girls. Tuckerman felt something give way within his heart, till it was flooded with a pure paternal tenderness. His relation to his nieces changed suddenly and permanently. His intercourse with them, he had observed sadly, had been of an arid, superficial sort: it had consisted of much discussion of ways and

means, of meagre conversation that seldom struck down to their real sympathies and interests. Once or twice they had seemed to come nearer, as on that evening by the fireside, only to move apart again, and to disappoint each other. Tuckerman picked up the thimble and held it in his hand.

"Was ye thinkin' o' such a thing as dinner this night, s'rr?" said Maggie, at the door. "It's been long waitin' for ye."

Three sides of the table blank; the solitary place with its silver and china spread wide; and Maggie pining for conversation.

"It's not so many dishes to wash, but I'd rather see 'em sittin' here for all that: Miss Lucy forninst ye, and the other young ladies givin' thimsilves pokes under the table."

"Yet you are busier than you used to be, Maggie."

"Miss Lucy has a comprehinsion o' the wurruk. It's what few has. They ain't done it thimsilves. That 's just the root o' all the throuble — the mistresses don't know what they 're askin'."

"You and I never had any trouble, Maggie."

"Because you 're a gintleman, s'rr, and a gintleman knows when he don't know."

"Thank you, Maggie."

"Not that the other young ladies baint very nice and pleasant in their talkin'. I'm laughin' the day long. But Miss Frances is not the same as Miss Lucy. There's not that contint in her, and not that quietness. She'll come to it when she's had troubles enough, likely not. She's a one to git married."

"I know your views, Maggie."

"I 'm thankin' Hiven ivery day I've not a drunken husband to be makin' a saint o' me. And you've the same to thank God for, Mr. Tuckerman."

"My nieces will save me from matrimony, Maggie."

"Indade, I belave they will, s'rr, and that 's why I'm glad they've come ter ye," said Maggie, candidly, as she removed the single soup plate.

When Tuckerman went to his library, he found two letters upon his desk. One was from Betty; one from Aunt Plummer herself. After reading the letter from his aunt, he paced the room, and had taken up his hat to walk out, when his friend Partridge came in upon him.

"Hullo, Partridge, I want to read you a letter."

"You are like the fellow in the play, — always reading a letter."

" Oh, you remember three months ago. I am not very well satisfied with the three months. I have meant well, but I have bungled it."

"I suppose they needed rather gingerly handling — sensitive, 'marked fragile,' and all that."

"I seem not to have succeeded in making them contented. Lucy and Frances the other day petitioned me to release them; they did n't wish to be a burden to me, and so on, and when Aunt Plummer's invitation came, Betty, who is rather my pet, was beside herself. They all stay with me more or less against their wishes. That's not one's idea of a home."

"Youth is ungrateful," said Partridge, out of his wisdom of thirty years. "You must take that into account. You must n't be too fragile yourself."

"A rather singular thing has happened to me in their

absence. I have made the discovery that I have at last the proper feelings of an uncle towards them. Partridge, I have missed my girls to the verge of unmanliness; I could n't have missed them more if I 'd been their aunt."

"Miss 'em myself," said Partridge, in a paternal tone. "Pretty to have round, 'a rosebud garden of girls.' I quite miss the feminine swish about your establishment, Tuckerman. And they were generally calling to each other up above. Nice voices, your nieces have, — lucky for you."

"Since you are such an authority," his friend continued, "tell me what you think is the matter. Why are they not contented?"

"Idleness," answered the oracular Partridge, — "they've no vent for their energy."

Tuckerman pondered this reply. "They happened upon the long vacation," he said at length. "They have active minds and they come out of an active community. They are full of initiative and adventure. You may be right, Partridge. Miss Wynne, on the other hand, said we should n't make things go — my nieces and I — until we loved each other. That was a woman's way of putting it."

"Well, love and work are two pretty good things."

"I had my own notion about work for them. I meant all three to go to school."

"Why not stick to it?"

"I may, if you and Miss Wynne will strengthen my hands. I am temporizing with my nieces. Frances wishes to go to New York to enter a School of Expression, — I believe that is the word."

"Good heavens! What ails the girl?"

"I suspect genius is the trouble. A little genius is a dangerous thing."

"She ought to go to a plain school and get it taken out of her."

"They must have some further education. Women can't afford to be ignorant in these days. It sets them wrong with the world, as it did n't use to. I've had to come round on that subject."

"I hate a bluestocking," said young Partridge.

"So do I, male or female. That old fellow Jenks, for example."

Partridge gave a sympathetic grunt. "Let us have your letters," said he.

"One is from Betty; the other, from Aunt Plummer, has disturbed me."

"Take the undisturbing letter first."

"That's a bad handwriting," and the uncle showed an untidy page to Partridge. "It seems to be the handwriting of the New Girl: upright, characterless, and in Betty's case, careless and unformed. She has a fund of general information, but she can't read and write. She is as wide awake as a Chicago newspaper, but she can't write her name decently. She shall!"

"That's the proper business of a guardian. I like your spirit."

"Here is the letter: —

"My dear Uncle Ellery, — We all miss you very much. We wish you had come. We have Miss Rose Allen to go round with us instead. We all like her, but especially Frances. Frances will do anything she says,

and she never did before. Miss Rose takes us somewhere every day, but I go alone to the Museum. I have read three books by Dickens, and that makes six volumes. I enjoyed them very much, especially Pickwick. Don't you just love Pickwick? Aunt Plummer has a Persian cat, Philippa, that does not like us. She gets up and walks right out of the room, like a duchess, Frances says. Lucy is sewing, mending my skirt. She said she would if I would write to you, but I *like* to write to you better than to *anybody* else in the world.

"Your affectionate niece,

"ELIZABETH BELL."

"Betty's all right," laughed Partridge. "Now for Aunt Plummer."

"DEAR NEPHEW, — Before your nieces and my grandnieces arrive home, I will inform you of the conclusion I have reached. I have intended from the first to relieve you in part of the care of them; but I wished to judge for myself of their characters and dispositions before deciding how to do this. I have now made up my mind that I will take the second one. She is the one who most needs a home with older women. Lucy is very properly placed as your housekeeper for some years to come; and Betty should be with her eldest sister, who is a mother to her. Moreover, the little Elizabeth appears singularly well able to take care of herself. She has required no entertaining; whereas Frances has rather sought my society, and appears to need guidance. She has faults that should be corrected, but that never would be corrected in your house. Her sisters admire every-

thing she does, and tell her to her face that she is a genius. I doubt it. But she is a promising girl, if vanity does not eat her up. Who is there in your household, or among your friends, to exert a right influence upon her?"

"I'll volunteer," said Partridge.

"And so the letter goes on. What do you say to it?"

"Aunt Plummer is an old humbug," answered Partridge. "She has taken a huge fancy to the girl, and wants to get her away from you, that's all. You have always represented Aunt Plummer as a person of truth; that letter is a fraud."

"Aunt Plummer, true enough, can give Frances advantages that I cannot. She can spend money on her. Moreover, Partridge, I have the highest regard for Miss Rose Allen."

"Have you, indeed?" said Partridge with exaggerated interest.

"Lucy writes me that Miss Allen has persuaded Frances to wait a year before entering her School of Expression. I appreciate that influence. On the other hand, sisters should not be separated."

"On no account," said the experienced Partridge.

"I suppose I must leave it to the girl herself," concluded her uncle, after some thought. "It might lead to a more brilliant future than any I could help her to. There are possibilities, and Frances has imagination, — she will see them. But it disturbs me: I do not want to part with Frances, that's the truth of it."

"Nor do I," laughed Partridge.

"Help me to keep her contented here."

"With all my heart!"

"They will come home to-morrow, and I will put the question to her. Aunt Plummer has left it to me. I have really no idea what Frances will say. Pity that after three months I know her so little. I wish you would give yourself a little trouble, Partridge, to understand the girl. I think she might explain herself to you when she would not to me."

"Seriously, Tuckerman, it is n't the stage that's got hold of her?"

"She has n't confided in me, but by Lucy's behavior I fear it may be."

"Then your only hope is Miss Rose Allen."

"Or you, Partridge."

"What do you mean?"

"I think you might tell Frances the truth about her talents better than I could. People don't take such things from their relatives."

His friend looked dubious. "It's not an agreeable commission."

"It would be an act of friendship."

XI

RISING TO AN EMERGENCY

MR. TUCKERMAN could not bring himself to suggest to Frances her departure, on the day of her return, the more that he overheard her say to Lucy, "We had to go away before it would seem home."

"The getting home is best of all," Lucy answered in her loving voice.

"It's because we *know* you so much better than anybody else," said Betty cosily, and laid her head an instant on his coat-sleeve. Tuckerman tasted new happiness.

Betty was off to the kitchen, from which were heard boisterous rejoicings. Mrs. Horace Tuckerman called that evening, and the interview with Frances was still delayed. Mrs. Horace looked the girls over suspiciously. No doubt they had exercised their wiles upon Aunt Plummer, a susceptible old lady, always taking her sudden fancies.

"You have enjoyed yourselves, I hope," said Mrs. Horace dryly. "Such a house must be quite a new experience."

"Our aunt combines pomp and simplicity," Tuckerman remarked amiably. "I like her cold mutton and boiled potatoes, and her 'inside man' and her 'outside man,' as she calls them."

"She has a houseful of idle servants."

"Oh, but there are so many things to polish!" said Lucy.

"Is that Miss Allen working herself into Aunt Plummer's good graces?"

The girls, all devotion to Miss Rose, were incapable of answering. "That's the danger of a companion," their aunt continued. "The old lady may hate her, or she may get disastrously under her influence. It's a great risk, where there are lawful relatives, and Aunt Plummer old and helpless as she is."

Betty listened wide-eyed, taking in a new view of the world. "Aunt Plummer is n't helpless, and Miss Rose Allen never did any such things, — *she*'s perfectly ladylike!"

"You are a pert child," said Aunt Laura. "No wonder you get red, with such speeches." She turned her back on Betty, and inquired, compassionately, "How is Maggie?" Sympathy for Maggie was part of Mrs. Horace's attitude towards the nieces.

"Maggie has not been well," Mr. Tuckerman replied. "She calls it the dumps. She lost her appetite while the girls were away. So did I."

"Indeed!"

"She won't let us help half so much as we want to," said Lucy earnestly.

"H-m-m, there are few such." Mrs. Tuckerman related experiences of her own.

Nor was there opportunity next morning to lay Aunt Plummer's proposal before Frances. Mr. Tuckerman took his place at the breakfast-table, absently sipped his coffee, and glanced at his paper.

"Does it taste as it usually does, Uncle Ellery?"

"Taste, taste, — why not?"

"And the muffins, do you see any difference?"

"Muffins? What is the matter with the muffins?"

"Betty," whispered Lucy, "more cream. In the refrigerator."

Mr. Tuckerman was half way through his breakfast when he looked up suddenly. "Where's Maggie?"

"Sick in bed."

"We must have another maid; we must have a trained nurse," said Tuckerman at once.

"We have three maids and a pretty well trained nurse, Uncle Ellery. I think Maggie is not very sick, only just enough to give us a chance. We have never had a fair chance since we have been in this house, Uncle Ellery."

"Well, if that's the way you look at it," said her puzzled uncle.

"Maggie is a tyrant: she never would let us work. Now she's flat on her back, and we shall have the house to ourselves for a little while."

"I see, Lucy; this is what they call rising to the emergency: this is the Western spirit. We can take our meals at the inn."

"Never!" cried Lucy. "It would be a disgrace."

"You don't know us yet, Uncle Ellery," said Frances. "Lucy has been to cooking-school."

"But Maggie, — I am concerned about her. I never knew her to be ill before."

"You should have heard her laments and apologies; but the poor thing could n't stand, she was so dizzy. We'll take good care of her, and don't you think the

doctor had better come, Uncle Ellery? And mind, your dinner will be ready just the same."

It proved to be an emergency indeed; for Maggie was in bed three weeks. Twinbridge had its problem of domestic service, as well as every other spot in America. It was a problem that Tuckerman was pleased to think he had solved. Such a breakdown in his system had never occurred till now. He insisted upon outside aid, and, in spite of Lucy's protests, haunted city intelligence offices. Alas, at his deprecating mention of general housework in a suburb, he was met with a pitying smile.

Tuckerman railed at an underdone civilization and an ill-organized society; and Lucy continued to get breakfast. She was secretly glad that she was saving her uncle's money. As for a trained nurse, she would not hear of it, since Maggie's illness was not dangerous. Maggie's gratitude would have been cloying, if it had not been tempered by her frequent crossness.

"Ye're like one o' the Sisters, all pity and gintleness to yer poor fellow-craturs. I see it in yer eyes, that lovin' look for all they fall upon." But if Maggie grew lyrical at times, she could also break out with, "Did ye think I'd be takin' such stuff as that? Och, now, I'm tired of it all. I'll be gittin' up and dressin' me and up and out. It's oppression, keepin' me here. I'll call yer uncle, I will. I can hear that scrub woman ye've got in, sloppin' up my kitchen."

Though Lucy took the lead, the novelty of the situation and the opportunity to distinguish herself stirred Frances quite as much as it did Lucy. She cared not much about plain cooking, and would have liked to subsist on salads and desserts. Frances set in order

a room delightfully, arranged and rearranged, with charming effects. "It's just an extension of playing with dolls," she cried. "We've never stopped doing it from doll days, we girls. I could n't be happy if I did n't play with a house. Lucy, I know what has ailed us since we have been here, — idleness! Work feels good."

With all the ardor of her temperament Frances threw herself into housework for at least three days; at the end of that time dish-washing began to pall, and the stern realities of housekeeping made themselves felt. The grate broke in the kitchen range and the "stove man" was not prompt; all three forgot the refrigerator pan; and Frances broke a blue dish, that was at least a hundred years old, with a crack that was at least fifty.

Maggie had a bad day, and was first cross and ungrateful, and then made matters worse with tears of repentance. Uncle Ellery was immured in his study, and when he came forth to meals appeared to forget all about the domestic crisis. The girls expected applause and approbation; but their uncle absently ate what was set before him, and said not a word.

"I suppose that was the highest compliment he could pay us," Lucy reflected.

"Just like a man," said Frances, — "no sympathy, no imagination! And we've worked so hard! My feet don't ache like feet, — they ache like teeth."

Lucy looked tired, but insisted that it was grand to rise to an emergency.

"You've been rising to emergencies ever since you were ten years old, — poor little Lucy! What I object to is emergencies lasting forever. I like one a day."

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"I guess you would n't," said Betty pertly, as she polished a dish; for which Frances chased her with the dish mop.

But there came a day when Maggie sat up and was overrunning with praises and blessings; and on the same day Uncle Ellery commended the pudding. Lucy beamed. "Maggie will soon be about, and we have really and truly had a good time, Uncle Ellery. We've got acquainted with this house, for one thing: that funny old pantry and all the back kitchens and wood-sheds. It is n't much like a flat."

"It's getting acquainted with ourselves when there is n't any girl," said the thoughtful Betty.

"How's that?" asked Tuckerman.

"We see each other so much; we talk so much more."

"And we've got so much better acquainted with Uncle Ellery," said Lucy. "He's even sat down in the kitchen."

It was in the second week of the emergency that Frances remarked one morning, "I feel too grubby and kitcheny for anything. My head is full of pots and pans. I am going to work among the books in the library, now Uncle Ellery has taken himself off for the day."

"You'd better not dust his books, Frances," said Lucy solemnly.

"That's just what I am going to do. He will never know. He is coming home on the five-thirty train."

The housewifely Lucy had longed to set her uncle's books in order, but had not had the hardihood to do it. The low walls of his study were filled to the ceiling; the table was piled with books; the desk was banked with them; they lay upon the floor. They gave the room a

rich, dense look; it seemed crowded with life. Frances felt excited whenever she crossed its threshold. This was the company of men and women who think and who feel. She had no reading habits, but she occasionally rushed at a book and embraced it. Rows of books that she had never looked into held for her a world of romance.

In a vague way Mr. Tuckerman had offered his nieces the freedom of his library; but he had never taken down a book and put it into Frances' hand. He did not know her; he never would know her, she thought. A selfish man took no trouble to know people. Miss Rose Allen was not half an hour in finding her out. Frances had one other confidante, — a large red note-book, with "The Journal of Francesca" written large on the title-page.

On this day she was thinking — for Frances was usually thinking — of what she called "links in the chain of Life." "The Journal of Francesca" abounded in these metaphors.

"I've been aching to get into these books, partly to dust them, poor things! — that's honest enough, — but oh, because I can't keep away from them! As long as Maggie stood there saying, 'I don't niver dare touch thim books; I just swape out wance a week, but I'd be feared o' my life to touch thim books,' I was afraid. Now I dare!"

Frances was an impatient worker but not an incapable one. She dusted rapidly and deftly several rows of books, and had the discretion to place them precisely as she found them, big and little, paper and leather, with the irregularity which distinguishes the scholar's

library from the "gentleman's." She was sitting on the floor by the west window when the title of a small book caught her eye, "The Defense of Poetry." Her heart rose to the words instantly, and rose higher when she read the author's name, *Shelley*, magic syllables, all music.

"Poetry," she read, "is the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds. We are aware of evanescent visitations of thought and feeling, arising unforeseen and departing unbidden, but elevating and delightful beyond all expression. . . . It is, as it were, the interpenetration of a diviner nature through our own; but its footsteps are like those of a wind over the sea, which the morning calm erases, and whose traces remain only, as on the wrinkled sand which paves it. . . . Poetry redeems from decay the visitations of the divinity in man. Poetry turns all things to loveliness. . . . It transmutes all that it touches, and every form moving within the radiance of its presence is changed by wondrous sympathy to an incarnation of the spirit which it breathes; its secret alchemy turns to potable gold the poisonous waters which flow from death through life; it strips the veil of familiarity from the world, and lays bare the naked and sleeping beauty which is the spirit of its forms."

Just then Mr. Tuckerman walked into his study, having returned by an earlier train. Frances sprang to her feet.

Her Uncle Ellery was a man of considerable courage, but he shrank from formal interviews with his niece Frances. He had put off for several days the momentous proposition from Aunt Plummer. The sense that his hour had come outbore any vexation at finding

his niece in possession of his library. He barely glanced at her, or he might have seen that the dull and sullen look was gone, which often threatened to disfigure the girl's beautiful mouth and brow. He would have seen her face lovely with a mysterious light as she held fast a little brown-covered book.

"I have wanted to see you, Frances," he began.

How could she explain that she had been "dusting" Shelley's "Defense of Poetry"? So she said nothing. She felt a buoyancy that overrode all annoyance.

At last her uncle looked at her, and knew what had happened. "What is the book?"

She held it up.

"Ah, I used to read it." He turned the leaves, glanced at passages marked years ago, in his own youth. He handed it back to her. "Would you like to keep it? I will give you another, Sir Philip Sidney's 'Defense of Poesie.' It used to be on the shelf beside Shelley's. Yes, here it is."

Frances took the books into her lap and folded her hands over them.

Then, without more ado, her uncle took from his desk Aunt Plummer's letter, and faithfully communicated its contents to Frances. She spoke not a word till he ended; then, with a flash of her eyes and a thrill of her voice, she answered, "No! no!"

To her uncle's embarrassment, she followed this with a pitiful little sob: "Do you want me to go, Uncle Ellery?"

"Of course not, my child," he said in a tone he had used only with Betty. Frances looked appealingly about the room at the books and the pictures, and last at her

uncle. He tried to help her. "You could not leave your sisters."

"It's not that exactly, though it's that partly. I think I would rather be here than there, that is all."

"I will write to Aunt Plummer," said Mr. Tuckerman, deeply gratified.

"I will write to her and thank her. But don't let her take Lucy or Betty, — *don't*, Uncle Ellery!"

The letters were dispatched and were followed by a command to Oldhaven, which Tuckerman instantly obeyed. On his return he gave no account of his interview with his aunt; he was silent and tired at dinner, and went away to his study. He merely told the girls that Aunt Plummer sent her love to them, and, in order that they might run down to see her often, she had given them a fifty-trip ticket; for their kind aunt was business-like at the height of her emotions. As he had placed the ticket in his pocket-book, Tuckerman himself had felt not a little moved. He was at the midway of life, when the envy of youth is so keen, and the pity for old age so poignant.

In the third week of the emergency, Maggie grew more and more rebellious: "What am I dawdlin' here for? This'll niver pay the rint, and we've no pig!"

Betty ran to repeat this speech to her uncle.

"That is the old Maggie. I would let her get the dinner."

Maggie's amiability was completely restored; she not only got dinner, but she permitted Lucy, late from cooking-school, to describe to her the newest thing in soup stock. "Och," says Maggie gayly, "I'm gainin' exparience ivery day. Another green leaf's fallen off me!"

Maggie mocked at cooking-school learning, and yet she listened keenly to hints dropped by Lucy. Tuckerman ate with a relish. "I had not noticed it before," he said, "but I believe we had got into a rut: steak and chops, chops and steak."

"Maggie 's real progressive," said Lucy, in hearty Western English.

"It is n't that at all," Frances declared. "She adores Lucy, and no wonder."

"Tell me your conclusion about housework," said their uncle.

"Be able to do it, but don't do it: that's mine!" was Frances' verdict.

"You must know it," Lucy continued earnestly. "Half the trouble is ignorant mistresses; but it is going to be better. There was the Brides' Class at our school, every girl engaged except me. I never saw anything so romantic and so sensible. Everything they cooked they cooked for *him*." Lucy blushed very prettily, her uncle thought.

"Betty, what is your sage opinion of housekeeping?"

"I don't like to spend my time."

"Your valuable time!" her sisters shouted. "Betty, don't talk with your mouth full, especially when you are giving us wisdom."

"I'd rather read, and stay outdoors, and go and see my friends," Betty persisted.

"I agree with all three," Mr. Tuckerman concluded; "but, on the whole, I would rather have my nieces 'set free for higher service,' as I have heard it put."

There was one quite unexpected result from their la-

bors; the three sisters rose immensely in the esteem of the community. They had been objects of interest hitherto, but the notable housewives of Twinbridge had been able to form no opinion of their usefulness. "Very pretty to look at, but what more?" one old lady inquired.

Word of their achievement was soon abroad. Said one housekeeper to another: "You would n't have to go far to find a relative of theirs who behaved very differently. When she found her hired girl was down with pneumonia, she got her out of the house at the risk of the girl's life. Mr. Tuckerman's famous Maggie has a kind of slow fever, they say. Well, there is everything to be said for trained nurses except that they are cheap. I suppose those girls understand very well what an expense they are to their uncle, and they have the delicacy to wish to spare his money. I hear that they carry on the house so that you would never know the difference. My husband calls it their Western grit, the kind that has settled the country."

Aunt Laura had dropped in often with advice: it was what she had expected; she had seen Maggie's illness coming on; they would have to be very careful of her if they expected her to hold out with such a family. Mrs. Horace made her brother-in-law the handsome offer of his dinners while the crisis lasted. Tuckerman looked thoughful.

"Oh, no, no!" the girls cried. "We want him here."

He continued to dine with his nieces, until one Sunday noon Maggie served up her usual excellent repast.

XII

THE JOURNAL OF FRANCESCA

I MAY be Frances or Fanny or Fan to other people, but I am Francesca to you, dear Katrina. You may be my imaginary friend, but you are the most real one I have. I have not written you a word since before we went to Aunt Plummer's, and good reason why! We've been back three weeks, — such weeks! Your Francesca is not going to talk servants — you are too good for that.

I've missed you so, Katrina, these four weeks! You and the public are the only friends one can really confide in. I can't have the public yet, so you shall have my heart till I do. Imagine confiding in Uncle Ellery! Yet I sometimes think an uncle might work up into something perfectly delightful. I am always seeing possibilities in Uncle Ellery. Old people are always seeing possibilities in young people; they never think of all their own possibilities that never got developed.

Relations are your ready-made friends, I've read somewhere: I'd rather have a friend made to order. I should certainly have ordered Aunt Plummer, but not Aunt Laura, you'd better believe! I'm feeling very tender, almost tearful about Aunt Plummer. For something has really happened at last in this dull spot. Katrina, I was offered another life, another world, another fate, and I refused it quick as a wink. Oh, not matrimony, — romance does n't take that line with me.

Katrina, do you ever notice how things are woven in and out, how everything is a link in the chain of life, the most unlikely causes fastened tight to effects you'd never dream of? These were the links: Maggie was sick, we were let loose in the house, I attacked Uncle Ellery's books just for a reaction from pots and pans, and I discovered a book, — well, Katrina, it made me feel that I must have things of that sort just to breathe. At that very moment Uncle Ellery came in and asked me if I would like to go and live with Aunt Plummer. No, I said. That was a time I saw possibilities in Uncle Ellery. I showed him the book, and I said not a word; but he knew what I meant, and what is more, he let me finish dusting his library.

Now the reason I feel so about Aunt Plummer is this. She was perfectly lovely to us, though she did tell us a good many facts about ourselves. How she did train us! — such things as always to leave a newspaper turned right side out for the next person; such things as never to call our family "the family" or "they" — as bad as the man who says "the madam" or "Mrs. B." Aunt Plummer ought to have brought up twelve children, and she never had one. But when we went away she made a very complimentary little speech, said we were good guests: we were punctual, ate what was set before us, and knew how to take ourselves out of the way. It has come out since that she really liked me and really wanted me. When I was there she usually laughed at me, — called me high-flown, — the idea! It would have been rather romantic, Katrina, to be rich and wear beautiful clothes, and go to balls and parties in Oldhaven and perhaps in Boston.

Uncle Ellery told me that Aunt Plummer would do it handsomely if she did it at all. He even said that there was a better chance of my settling in life, — *marrying*, he was too fastidious to say. I doubt it. There seemed to be pairs of the most superior maiden ladies in Oldhaven, just as there are all up and down Twinbridge. That's their way of "settling in life" in New England. It's a great difference between the East and the West, there being no men here, absolutely not a man. I have spoken to just three since I have been here: the minister, Uncle Ellery, and his great friend, Mr. Samuel Partridge. This friend seems to think we girls are a joke. As if there were the least thing funny about us in those black, black clothes! O Katrina! We don't forget, though I know people think we do. Lucy says Mr. Partridge is trying to cheer us up. He is another that can't bear Chicago. He just grins when you talk about it, — says the first thing he asks for in Chicago is a time-table. And yet he raves over the World's Fair, — I will do him justice. He has a mother who is in mortal terror lest somebody may want to marry him. She can set her mind at rest about Lucy and me. Lucy, — well, Lucy might write it in her own journal, if she had such a thing, but I hardly think it would be honorable in me. I'll keep to my own affairs. That was one thing Aunt Plummer found fault with, to be sure. I always talked about myself. She as good as told me I was a selfish, egotistical, insufferable creature, such a contrast to Lucy, I was given to understand. Lucy was the one she ought to have adopted, only we would n't have let her have her. Lucy is a saint, and does n't know it: you could n't bear a saint that did.

Then as to Aunt Plummer's money, — what is money, I should like to know? That is what Aunt Plummer calls high-flown. Very well, I mean to fly high, — just soar!

But to come down to plans, I did agree with Miss Rose Allen that it would be well for me to have a year at the Ridge before I began my studies. She and Miss Wynne's niece, who is the principal, are classmates and great friends, and Rose wants me to study Shakespeare with Miss Ketcham. (She is twenty-eight years old, but she asked me to call her Rose the last day we were there!) Of course I have studied Shakespeare: I adore him! But nobody here seems to imagine it. Everybody in Twinbridge talks as if Shakespeare belonged to them and nobody else. That's the tone of Twinbridge, and it's what *I* call provincial. They seem surprised that such persons as we ever heard of Coverdale. I guess I could recite the "Pine Tree" to them, if they cared to listen. But no one thinks of us individually. We are Mr. Tuckerman's Nieces, — that is what we suffer from. It's bad for sisters to be a sort of "Co."

But I haven't done with Aunt Plummer, Katrina. Uncle Ellery told me I ought to think of it from her side; and I hadn't at all, it is true. She had a great deal of family feeling, he said. Wild horses wouldn't have dragged it out of him that she was fond of me, simply loved me. I rather suspected it, but you never know where you are with a philanthropist. She said she liked us, but was disappointed that our manners weren't worse. You never know where you are with a humorist, either. She's a dear. But how dreadful

to be old! I'd rather die, much rather! Yet, if you are going to be old, it's better to carry it off the way Aunt Plummer does.

Now she has had another blow, for Mr. Mathison has refused the call to the First Church of Oldhaven. I looked at Lucy to see how she took it, but she was as calm as you please. She knew it already! It makes everybody think more of him and think more of Twinbridge. I could write chapters about Twinbridge, Katrina. There is nothing here to compare with Lake Michigan, but in a little, quiet, gentle, sleepy way, Twinbridge is perfectly charming. Even I can see that. There are two old stone bridges close together, because the river makes a horseshoe almost right in the middle of the town. But if you want grandeur, if you want thrills, go West, Katrina. Why, the inside of America to people like Uncle Ellery is just like the interior of Africa on the old maps. Provincial? It does n't express it. And they are so prejudiced about little things: Uncle Ellery thinks that anybody that says, "Pleased-to-meet-you" is n't fit to live. I met an old lady here that asked me, "Haow do you like?" After that, to talk about "the language of the Illinois tribes"! There was a man the other day holding forth about America, and he thought he had a fine phrase, "the vast unloveliness of Chicago," and he liked it so much that he said it a second time. I'd like to set that man down on the Lake Shore Drive, and make him watch the moon rise over Lake Michigan, till he had something to say about the "vast loveliness of Chicago." I hated that man!

But I could forgive Uncle Ellery's not appreciating Chicago if he would appreciate my father. That is the

thing I can never get over, Katrina, and there is no use trying. He only shows it by never speaking of him, ignoring him. It hurts me so! I never can love Uncle Ellery while he treats my father so. Oh, I did love my father, Katrina. The love and the grief ache so sometimes! Only a year ago we were all so happy, — oh, so happy every night when we heard his latchkey! Katrina, my heart will break! I don't want to get over it. I want to get over every-day troubles, but not Sorrow!

There are a good many every-day troubles since I came here, Katrina. Aunt Plummer said I thought too much about myself; but don't you know those dreadful times when you don't like yourself, when you go round days and days, and can't *bear* yourself? I've been disagreeable ever since I came here, and nobody knows it better than I do. I can even see it in my face. If you live with somebody you don't quite like it gives you the most dreadful expression, — I suppose it is distrust, and that is a horrid thing.

Yet I have times of liking Uncle Ellery. Once he tried to comfort us when we were all miserable, and I really pitied *him*, he was so distressed about us. Another time was when he gave me two of his own books; for I thought if he liked those books, and I liked them, then we must like each other; is n't that an equation you can prove? Well, we did for about five minutes. I could see he had a soul, Katrina, though I suppose he could n't show it long at a time. That is what it is to be a New Englander. What an escape we girls had! Our mother escaped; our father rescued her. It must go far, far back to the Pilgrim Fathers, when they had such a hard time that the only way to bear it was to say

nothing, — and so, saying nothing has seemed the very pinnacle of virtue ever since.

I must talk to you, Katrina. Betty is too young; Lucy disapproves; Uncle Ellery takes a curious tone: he simply will not argue about it. You know, my best and dearest friend, that I must have Expression, and that I wish to live for Art. I read somewhere that Love was better for a woman. Katrina, you know I thought once my heart was broken. It was n't at all! I found out that Love might be for others, but that Art was all the world to me. I was n't sure at first which art. I have written, and signed myself Francesca. Nobody ever knows or cares, or reads it or pays for it. That is n't Fame exactly: I have no illusions as I once had. Yet I had to write a sonnet that night after I had first seen the Ocean: *you* would have had to, Katrina! Then I felt better. And I could n't let it lie in my portfolio: I had to send it to a Boston paper. You can't stop yourself doing such things. It is one of the queerest feelings: a great many people don't seem to understand it.

They used to tell my father I had talent, and he would laugh and look so proud, — Katrina, in all my life that is the best thing I have to remember. When I read and recited at school, somebody called me a remarkable girl. I put tears into my voice, and made them come into my eyes, though I was n't crying a bit, and was laughing the next moment. And yet I enjoyed the tears so, and was so enraptured to see tears in somebody else's eyes, that I never was so happy before. I seemed to be two people, one doing the thing, and the other looking at it, and both at the height of bliss. Some dreadfully prosaic person said, " I

would n't indulge a girl in playing with emotions; very unwholesome."

I knew just what she meant, and from that moment I determined to be just what she was thinking of. Yes, Katrina, I wish to be an actress. It is the subject that never can be mentioned in this family. It makes Lucy cry. I told Rose Allen, and she just advised me to wait a year, and to make better preparation in some subjects. I am a perfectly reasonable person, and I can see that some further study of literary and artistic subjects would be an advantage. Besides, it is too hard to leave Lucy and Betty so soon after all that has happened to us. They are the only thing left of home and father.

XIII

BROOK FARM

MR. TUCKERMAN had worked hard through the summer. His nieces had learned respect for the closed study door; but when their uncle ate an absent-minded luncheon, and took at once to his books again, with no exercise but a solitary walk at sundown, the girls united and said that this should not go on. Uncle Ellery had grown thin since their arrival, and it reflected upon them. That Uncle Ellery never took a holiday was too dreadful a reproach to his nieces. Their action — for these three always acted — was immediate. It occurred to them that the following Monday was Labor Day, and that every working-man in the state had a holiday, except their unfortunate uncle. What to do? Betty swelled visibly with an idea. Having communicated it, she looked relieved and complacent, and the two elder sisters rewarded her with shakes and squeezes such as her round little person invited.

Labor Day arrived, and Uncle Ellery appeared at breakfast. He moved about the dining-room uneasily.

"Maggie, what is the matter with my study door? The catch has slipped, apparently. Have you ever known that to happen before? Every window is locked, or I would soon crawl in. It is rather a pity to smash a pane. I can't send for the locksmith, for I suppose they

are all off for their absurd holiday. This is really very annoying."

The sisters were full of exclamations. Betty, turning her back upon her uncle, pointed solemnly to her pocket.

"He's not the man to break down the door," said Frances to Lucy, while Mr. Tuckerman crossed the entry to give the lock one more shake.

He was the man, however, to laugh when he came back. "Rather a joke on me. I may be forced into a holiday. Upon my word, I can't remember when I have taken one."

"Not since we came, Uncle Ellery."

He looked at his nieces. "You have had no holiday, either. I declare, I forgot all about it."

"We spent a week at Aunt Plummer's."

"I have been very remiss. Why did n't you speak of it?"

"It 's you we 'd like to see having a holiday, you yourself, Uncle Ellery," said Betty, feeling for the key in her pocket.

"I have all the recreation I want: a book or a walk does for me. But you girls ought to be off somewhere such a day as this, if only we knew where to go."

"We know exactly," said Betty: "Brook Farm, in one of those things they call 'barges.' But perhaps you don't like whole days out of doors, Uncle Ellery."

"If you don't call them picnics, I do. Whom do you propose to take in your barge?"

"Oh, could n't we ask the Beveridge girls?"

"Am I to be the only man? Run, Betty, and ask Mother Partridge if she will let her boy Sam go to a picnic? And you 'd better ask her too."

"There is Mr. Partridge going by this very minute."

"Hullo, there," said Tuckerman; "how's your mother to-day?"

"Laid up with lumbago. I'm on my way to the drug store."

"Hold on a moment."

Partridge listened. "Who is going to chaperon the party, might I inquire? Mrs. Horace Tuckerman?"

"Do girls with an uncle have to have a chaperon?" cried Frances. "Look it up in the etiquette book."

"We might ask the old Miss Beveridge, the one that teaches."

"How old?" said Partridge judicially.

"She must be over thirty."

"The very thing! With old Mr. Tuckerman here, to assist. I will go home and ask my mother, poor lady!"

Partridge was the dutiful son of a loving mother, but it pleased his fancy to play the submissive son of a tyrannical parent.

Barge and driver were secured, the three Miss Beveridges persuaded, the wood basket packed with lunch, —and they were off!

"And good riddance!" said Maggie from the doorstep. "Now I'll have the day to mesilf, and a ryal time clanin' the pantry. 'Labor Day,' says I!"

The girls were disposed at one end of the barge, while the two men clung to the other, and settled into earnest conversation.

As they turned into the road that led out of town, what should they see lounging along the way but the well-known figure of Gus! He caught sight of them, and started on a run to overtake the barge. With a

clutch at the rail, he swung himself round into position upon the broad, low step. There he sat with back to the company, and spoke not a word.

"We never thought to invite him, so he's invited himself," said Betty. "Look at his back. I like to call him 'the young Augustus,' because he looks so different from the bust in the library," giggled Betty, which was as far as her sense of humor had developed.

"What have you got there, Gus?" his uncle inquired after a time.

Gus removed from his mouth a sticky ball on the end of a piece of wood. "They sold it to me for an all-day sucker: 't ain't more 'n a half-a-mornin' sucker!" He put it back, and became silent again.

"Who ever thought of Brook Farm?" asked the eldest Miss Beveridge. "I have lived here all my life and I have never been near it."

"I said either Brook Farm or the Wayside Inn," said Frances.

"You care so much for associations, don't you?" remarked the second of the Beveridges. "I suppose it is because you have never had any," she added good-naturedly. For the New Englander addresses the Westerner in the very language of the Englishman to the American. "Have you ever read Coverdale's poems?" she continued, looking from one to the other.

Things went amiably the rest of the way, and they flitted gay as butterflies from one subject to another. Serious conversation was going on at the other end of the barge, while the silent Gus sat enjoying the sweets of a stolen ride and an "all-day sucker."

Betty slid down the long oil-cloth seat to her uncle's

side, sat very straight, and looked at him out of the corner of her eye; all to no purpose. "Gus," she whispered, "come on inside."

"Naw."

Then she made her eyes big, tilted her head, and looked at Mr. Partridge as long as she could without winking. This, too, was utterly lost on a man who was saying, "As for the consolidation of such interests — "

Betty slid back, and past her sisters, up to the driver's seat. Gus turned round and had half a mind to follow her, but concluded his seat on the slanting step to be considerably more hazardous, and so hung on content.

They drove through pine woods, and then out among the fields, "the happy autumn fields" of golden September. By and by they turned into a lane. On one side rose old-fashioned terraces, shaded by noble elm-trees; while on the other side of the road ran a little brook gurgling and laughing to itself in the sunshine.

It was the eldest Miss Beveridge who understood the topography of Brook Farm. "Here is the Brook and here is the Farm!"

Frances drew a long breath. "The most romantic brook and the most romantic farm in this whole America, *I* think," she said ardently.

"And here stood the old farmhouse where Hawthorne arrived in the snowstorm, — here was the 'polar Paradise.'"

"The Brook Farmers had taste in landscape," said Partridge as they strolled up and down the slopes of the lovely little domain, and looked away to the sunny fields and the wooded hills. The road dipped and entered a

grove of pine trees, which offered a natural assembling place.

"They called it the Cathedral," said Miss Beveridge reverently.

"Was n't this the scene of their fancy dress picnic?" inquired Partridge.

"And where Channing preached," added Miss Beveridge.

"What conversation there must have been here!" said Frances. "*That* was society."

"You have been reading up," Mr. Partridge accused her.

"I always read everything about Brook Farm."

"To tell you the truth, so do I."

"I should like to try it all over again," said Frances.

"So should I, for a summer holiday."

"Another Blithedale romance," laughed Frances, gayly.

"There might be a better one," said Partridge ambiguously.

Frances chose to take it as a criticism of Hawthorne. "He did n't appreciate Brook Farm. He laughed at it," she said. "Ah, but Americans had ideals then."

"You think that we have grown worldly? — that money is the ideal now? It might appear so on the surface; but I assure you that is a superficial view."

Frances was flattered by his contradiction. Mr. Partridge was talking to her as she had heard him talk to her uncle. He argued for present-day American ideals. "Don't go through life wishing you had lived fifty or a hundred years ago. That's nonsense."

"Oh, no," cried Frances, "I love this very moment."

"So do I!"

While the ladies busied themselves with the luncheon, laid the cloth, and set out the viands, the two men sauntered under the trees. They talked no more of consolidated interests, but of that strange dream that still shed its romance over the scene.

"Let us be thankful for it," said Tuckerman. "It was a burst of poetry in unpoetical America."

"You are mistaken: America is alive with poetry. Do you know what your niece is about? Are you aware that you are harboring a poet?" Partridge drew out his pocket-book, selected with care a newspaper cutting, and handed it to Tuckerman, — "On First Seeing the Ocean," signed "Francesca."

Tuckerman read it thoughtfully. "Good, but not good *enough*."

"You are a cold-blooded chap: you are all critic. I looked for the affectionate uncle. Now that feels like poetry to me. There's one fine line, that about the likeness of prairie and ocean: there's a long roll in that line away off to the horizon. There's distance, perspective, and there's music."

"If I look at it as an uncle, I am touched. I see the girl's sensibility: it makes me rather afraid of her. If she is feeling everything like that! You will let me keep this, Partridge," and Tuckerman felt for his own pocket-book.

"No, I can't do that."

Tuckerman was indeed much moved by the incident, but chose to lapse into literary discussion. "The trouble with people of the literary temperament is that they deceive themselves as to their originality. They have some

freshness of expression, and they fancy therefore they have some fresh ideas. They have really nothing to say. You can't set up as a writer on a turn of expression."

"I don't agree with you." And a new discussion was launched, interrupted by the call to luncheon.

Nevertheless, Tuckerman looked at his niece with a different interest. There was indeed a touch of "Francesca" about her as she moved among the shadows and sunlit spaces of the grove, and as the woodland peace and beauty passed into her face.

Lucy, with a hostess's care, strove to separate her uncle from his friend and to lead him into conversation with the eldest Miss Beveridge. She was delighted with her success; for Miss Beveridge was an interesting woman, if she was permitted to get beyond the topic of the weather.

Partridge wandered away by himself and climbed the hill to the base of Eliot's Pulpit. He flung himself on the ground, his back against a pine tree. His meditations were too sleepy to be of any value.

Frances had set out by herself to explore Brook Farm and to find what trace she could of Margaret Fuller. She made a wide circuit of the place, and by the time she reached Eliot's Pulpit, Partridge had wakened from his nap. He rose to his feet, shaking off the pine needles.

"I think," said Frances exaltedly, "that Margaret Fuller was the most romantic woman that ever lived in America. She was romantically poor, and romantically gifted. She was a perfectly successful woman: she found expression. And then Italy, and love, and a tragic death! Ah, that was life!"

PROMISE ME ONE THING

ARY

"A countess to boot, one of the earliest American countesses."

Frances reproached him. "But she was so great," she added earnestly, "that nobody thinks of it."

"She talked too much."

His companion tried the effect of a long silence upon him.

Partridge pursued a train of thought. "You recite, like Margaret Fuller."

"Not now. I don't do anything now." Frances smiled faintly.

"Do you happen to know the 'Pine Tree,' Coverdale's 'Pine Tree'? This pine grove is the very place for it."

"I could n't recite for you alone. One person is too embarrassing an audience."

"You ought to rise above that: that is self-consciousness. You should have more imagination."

Frances poked the pine needles with her parasol and shook her head.

"If you would promise me one thing," she said at last.

"Well?"

"To tell me exactly what you think."

"Very well; I promise."

She flung aside her parasol and stood erect against the tall pine tree. Partridge did not move, but looked at her with the lowered head and the acute eye of the critic. "A pretty piece of nature," he said to himself. His critical gaze sharpened. He perceived that the time had come when he might do his friend the service which he had once reluctantly promised.

Frances caught his look, faltered, all but broke

down, and indeed recited her piece very badly. She ended red and angry.

If Mr. Partridge had been older, he would have let her go with some attempt at a compliment and a change of the subject. But he was still young enough to feel that he had a duty to perform. He was a connoisseur in dramatic affairs, as he very well knew, and, like Lord Hamlet, enjoyed giving directions to the players.

"You wish me to keep my promise?"

Frances nodded helplessly.

"The 'Pine Tree,' with its voices, is dramatic in its character. You gave it in a lyrical, sing song style. You failed to impersonate the voices. I should say that the dramatic was not your line, — rather the lyrical. But if I were you, I would n't take for granted that everything lyrical is melancholy. The 'Pine Tree' is one of the most joyous poems I know. You made it rather depressing."

Frances looked in his face and listened bravely.

"Nevertheless, you will undoubtedly read aloud agreeably in the family circle. That may be a great source of pleasure to one's friends."

"And it was you yourself that spoiled it all," Frances was thinking.

"I wonder if I have been thorough enough," Partridge was thinking.

They sat at opposite ends of the barge on the ride back to Twinbridge.

XIV

THE RIGHT OF WAY

THE education of his three nieces was a subject that Mr. Tuckerman threshed out in conversations with Miss Wynne, throughout the summer.

"I recommend the Ridge," said his friend frankly. "My niece is a woman of uncommon sense. She does not, for one thing, take herself too seriously, as some principals do. She is a simple, human young woman, with no awful assumption of superiority, or airs of the *grande dame.* Yet she does not find it necessary to be slangy or familiar. She is not the over-affectionate principal who 'my dears' the whole school, and tells you perpetually how she loves 'gyurls.' My niece is quite free from silliness. Your girls could not have a better friend."

"I am sure of that," said Tuckerman; "but to tell you the truth, though her school is not expensive in proportion to what it costs her, it is expensive for me."

"I have thought of that," Miss Wynne replied. "Do you remember, Ellery, how anxious we have been to secure some lectures on history from you?"

"I see your project," Tuckerman answered gloomily. Lecturing to schoolgirls was a professional degradation he had shrunk from. It was a shade worse than the popular magazine article.

"Look at it from the schoolgirls' side," Miss Wynne

pleaded. "They see a scholar; they learn what scholarship is." Tuckerman looked very dismal. "They gain interest and faith in their daily lessons; the lecturer reinforces the teaching of the school. You would be a strong backing for our history department. Such an arrangement would amply provide for the tuition of your nieces. I know you once refused a large sum the school offered you."

Tuckerman still looked very miserable. "I should feel like a fool lecturing to an audience of young ladies."

"I understand the sacrifice; but I assure you that you can do the thing with perfect dignity. You will see that they take you much more seriously than you do yourself. It will do the school good, and it will do you good."

"Humiliate me, yes!"

"Honest teaching can never humiliate you. Remember John Milton the schoolmaster: —

> 'and yet thy heart
> The lowliest duties on herself did lay.'"

"I suppose I have n't the 'cheerful godliness,'" Tuckerman answered.

"Have you time for the work? You can talk out of a full mind."

"Not easily. I should be obliged to make special preparation for such a class."

"You would find it the easier because the class use your text-book."

"I am aware that a man has to do occasionally the thing he hates to do. I believe I am not much used to it. Discipline, do they call it from the pulpit? I am rather old for it."

Miss Wynne shook her head gently, pathetically.

"The young minister paid me a visit the other day," she said.

Tuckerman smiled. "What counsel or comfort had the lad for you?"

"His face did me good; young as he is, it is the face of one who 'has attained to look on the beginning of peace.' Your Lucy has the look. I am glad when they find that peace in their youth — when they have lost no time."

Tuckerman gazed far off through the open window.

"Lucy tells me of the boys' club," said Miss Wynne suggestively.

"Oh, I've heard Mathison is doing a good thing with his boys' club, roping in the young hoodlums," answered Lucy's unsuspicious uncle. "We need more police in this town. I rather like that young fellow, Mathison. He often walks home from the post-office with me."

"Indeed! I fancied as much."

"What?" said Mr. Tuckerman sharply. "That never entered my head."

"You have several things, my friend, to go home and think about."

The result of Tuckerman's thinking was his acceptance of a position as lecturer on history at the Ridge, and the enrollment of his three nieces as pupils of the school.

School now became the serious business of the entire family. It had the right of way before all else. The idle summer life, of perpetual interruption, gave place to fixed hours and time carefully husbanded.

"I like to go as if I were wound up," Betty announced.

Tuckerman found himself before the history class, and managed to deliver his first lecture with scarce a look at the young ladies before him. It added the final touch to his discomfort that Lucy and Frances were upon the back bench. They had put themselves as far out of the way as possible, for they were quite as embarrassed as their uncle. That blood is thicker than water is never more painfully proved than on such occasions. The nieces took notes with frantic diligence, and dared not so much as look at each other. But the end of the hour was somehow reached without disaster, and the lecturer stole one look at the class and fled. Whether it was more trying to him or to his nieces to meet at the noonday meal, it would be hard to tell. There was not a word about the lecture until Betty broke the ice. "How did Uncle Ellery do? That is what I want to know."

Then Frances turned upon her uncle. "Why, Uncle Ellery, it was *fine!* We had no idea! They all said so."

"Yes, indeed," said Lucy.

Mr. Tuckerman shuffled and apologized and tried to snub all compliments. Nevertheless, he went to his study and took up his work all warm with the praise and pride of his nieces.

"Why, I had no idea he had such a voice," said Frances; "he has such a low, even voice at home, — no variety at all. It brings him out to lecture; he even looked handsome, and I never thought Uncle Ellery was handsome. I know he hated to do it. I heard Mr. Partridge joking him about it. I often wish Mr. Partridge

would let Uncle Ellery alone. I think he has a *very* bad influence upon him."

"But Uncle Ellery is so much older than he is," said Lucy.

"Uncle Ellery is a man very easily influenced," Frances asserted with an air of wisdom. "I can see the difference in him since we came. He has improved!"

Lucy laughed.

Frances continued, "He does n't say 'I particularly dislike' and 'I have a great distaste for' half so much as he did. Oh, if there is anything I detest it is an old Betty, man or woman."

Young Betty giggled with delight.

"Uncle Ellery is very much waked up about his work —I've noticed that. It made me provoked to hear Mr. Partridge the other day talking as if Uncle Ellery were some old fossil. He had let the world go by him, —he was n't ambitious enough. It made me furious."

Tuckerman bent to his new task in all seriousness. His secret desire to interest his own nieces put him on his mettle. The faces of Lucy and Frances, always in the background, were his inspiration after he had once learned to look his class in the eye. Each girl in her own way was a good listener: Lucy, from natural reverence and a loving disposition; Frances, from sheer intellectual curiosity. She forgot her uncle in his lecture; Lucy never lost sight of him.

At first, Tuckerman had ignored the presence of the two girls, and so far as he could, of the whole class; but he, too, was gradually mastered by his subject, and to his surprise, all but forgot they were not his college lads whom he was addressing. The girls were delighted

when Mr. Tuckerman lapsed into college slang, or drew his illustrations from football. Moreover, he was an excellent teacher: he imagined the mind of the pupil, brought out with varied repetition the points to be remembered, and led along the student from point to point so that she apparently kept the lead and did the thinking, while the master followed and confirmed her conclusions. Mr. Tuckerman's class were visibly thinking.

He held many discussions with the principal and smiled at that enthusiastic lady's expectation of his teaching. It was to make of his pupils lifelong readers of history, no less. "Let us give them the relish," said Miss Ketcham. "I am coming to think that the good result of school or college is the desire to read the right books for the remainder of one's life. These girls may go back to reading homes and they may not. If we can make a reader to grow where none grew before we have improved the stock. I send as many girls to college as I can," Miss Ketcham continued; "but I have rather taken up the case of the girls who do not go to college, your two elder nieces, for example. They will miss something, but they need not be uneducated women. They must have more will power, that is all. It is, on the whole, easier to go to college, where so much is done for you."

"As to my nieces and similar girls, pray let me hear."

"Bend everything in a girl's education to the awakening of intellectual curiosity. Boys have it in far greater strength: that is your masculine superiority. Intellectual curiosity means resources, and resources mean life, a real life."

"How about your stupid girl?"

The teacher's face softened. "How I have loved some stupid girls! If a girl is hopeless as regards books, be contented to make a lady of her. A dull girl who has the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit may be a perfectly agreeable woman. She may not have all the joys of existence, but she may sweeten the lives of others."

"You do not convince me," said Tuckerman. "I would rather not have her in my family."

"Your nieces are not stupid," declared Miss Ketcham judicially; "though Lucy has a slower mind than the others. They all have curiosity, to start with."

"That's their Western wide-awakeness," said their uncle, with a quite new pride in the girls.

"They have more initiative, I may call it," said Miss Ketcham, speaking carefully.

"Tell me frankly, are their manners Western?"

"Do you wish me to analyze? I will not criticise. They do not wait for their elders in the old-fashioned way. They greet me with beaming cordiality before I have a chance to speak. Frances lays her hand on my arm as she talks. Just the faintest lack of shyness, lack of reverence, in their manners, if you insist upon it. It is the joy of youth escaping every time they say good morning. Who would check it? Youth lasts such a little while," said Miss Ketcham wistfully.

"Strange they have shown so much more of this exuberance since they came to the Ridge. They have been staid enough this summer."

Miss Ketcham smiled at his inexperience. "Girls are good for each other. There was one point more," she continued. "I am sorry we have to call Lucy and

Frances special students: it is a demoralizing word, and encourages desultoriness. I hope in their case it will not mean that they have other interests than the school. I stipulate always that we shall have the right of way. It is the only condition under which I will carry on a school. This I say to parents and guardians, and I say it to you, Mr. Tuckerman. Lucy and Frances are in some ways so mature that they might have outside engagements and distractions. School must be the first thing if school they have at all."

Tuckerman was much amused at Miss Ketcham's strenuousness. "Upon my word," he said, "I would have a weekly class for parents and guardians."

"With all my heart. I am indeed writing a book, — a school manual for parents, with an appendix for physicians," said Miss Ketcham crisply.

Mr. Tuckerman promised faithfully that school should have the right of way in his family. "We have not spoken of Betty," he added.

"There is nothing to be said about her, except that she is the pupil every teacher is watching for."

"Please reform her handwriting if you can."

As for the girls, two excellent things resulted from beginning school: they had the daily companionship of young people, and they had plenty of work to do. Youth seeks youth. "Crabbed age and youth cannot live together," came to Tuckerman in moments of discouragement. He awaited with some anxiety the appearance of his nieces in school society, which has its successes and failures like those of the great world. There was something almost maternal in his eagerness that his nieces should be liked by their companions.

He took satisfaction in seeing Frances at recess pacing the garden walk with a new-made friend deep in conversation. This he observed from Miss Wynne's window, with a smile at schoolgirl friendships and feminine volubility. Girls and women appeared to him to talk all their waking hours. He doubted their ever accomplishing great tasks with such a disposition. Nevertheless, if other girls talked, he would not have his nieces silent.

It delighted him to hear Lucy chatter; for Lucy was indeed growing young. She said happily that she felt twelve years old again as she studied her lessons. Lucy worked slowly and laboriously, and what she learned, she knew. A charm of her character was teachableness, and another charm was gratitude. The two made her a beloved pupil, if not a brilliant one. Mr. Tuckerman was happy to see his niece's new interests and her new friends. The latter were of all sorts and conditions, ranging from Miss Wynne to colored Alexander, the porter. There was a plain-faced little boarder under ten, who nestled close to Lucy at recess; and there was the beautiful Miss Bonbright, who confided to Lucy that she was engaged.

As for Betty's intimates, they were not confined to school premises, but swarmed over her uncle's house, tore up and down stairs, and took possesion of the doorsteps. Then it was, I believe, that Mr. Tuckerman sighed and quoted "Crabbed age." Nevertheless, he was gratified that his nieces had conquered their little world. He knew the existence of a mysterious word among girls, the word *nice;* and he knew that no girl without this esoteric quality of niceness would be welcomed in Miss Ketcham's school.

A thought occurred to Tuckerman for the first time: it was the father rather than the mother who had brought up these three children, and following out this thought, their uncle came to some new conclusions.

Their companions had exchanged views about our girls. The sisters were discussed and accepted; though, indeed, young ladies without r's were inclined to criticise persons with an excess of them. "Niceness" among some schoolgirls goes no deeper than clothes and speech, but at the Ridge, while it included refined dress and manners, I am glad to say it added something which, on speech days, was referred to as "the spirit of the school."

Trouthe, and honour, fredom and curteisie.

Chaucer's verse was written in black letter over the library door. Knight or Lady, and especially a Ridge girl, was bound to love truth and honor, freedom and courtesy.

For the first time since their arrival in Twinbridge, the three sisters had full occupation for their minds, and for the first time they were contented and happy. Their uncle had set before them Miss Ketcham's theory of the right of way.

"Oh," said they, "that is intended for parents. It is you, Uncle Ellery, who will be begging us off from school, now that you have got this new idea of holidays."

"I was going to suggest that we all go to Boston on Saturday and look about a little."

"Essay to write," said Frances.

"Things to read up in the public library." Lucy shook her head.

"Piece to learn," sighed Betty.

"Come, come," said their guardian, "Saturday has its rights. Remember the day you locked my study door. Did you happen to know that Petrarch's friend played that very trick upon him?"

Mr. Tuckerman persevered. "How about a symphony concert Friday afternoon?"

This invitation was joyfully accepted. Half the school were to be at the concert, and it would be the beginning of their fun to tell the other girls that they too were going, and in the care of their uncle.

They had learned that their uncle was greatly looked up to by the older young ladies of Miss Ketcham's school, that he was regarded as a prodigy of learning, and that he was called cold and reserved, but fascinating. This did much to elevate Mr. Tuckerman in the opinion of his nieces, and increased their own importance most agreeably.

XV

SCHOOL KEEPS

For eight months Mr. Tuckerman's nieces were schoolgirls. The senior class, with whom Lucy and Frances consorted, prided themselves, it is true, upon being prettily behaved young ladies. They had a class president, wore the school pin, and were agitated about college examinations. Yet they were not past whispering and laughing, telling secrets, and writing notes, and throwing themselves with passionate ardor into the smallest events of school life. Miss Ketcham was a person of so much character that she gave her pupils considerable excitement. They were not pampered; they were allowed to know failure and disappointment, and even punishment, and were trained to meet them with humility and courage; but she also dispensed praise wisely, and there were school victories which seasoned with sweet excitement the daily routine. Miss Ketcham's reward might be no more than a glance, a signal of sympathy, but it kindled a girl's spirit for the day. She was general in her fault-finding, and specific in her praise. Parents said that Miss Ketcham had tact: she had indeed a delicate touch upon minds and hearts.

A school exercise that was much enjoyed was Miss Ketcham's weekly lecture on "Tempora et Mores," as "the Latin girls" called it. Girls are quick to resent cheap satire or weak facetiousness from their teachers;

she who "tries to be funny" is an object of contempt, but they will forgive anything to genuine humor. They took most of their castigations at the Ridge under this form. Miss Ketcham was possessed with the idea that youth is the sweetest, most interesting, and the most amusing thing in the world, and loved and laughed at her girls till they themselves entered into the fun of youth.

Betty announced one night at table, "That is the first time I ever heard in all my life that you must n't sing and hum if you felt like it, especially hum."

"Was n't she too funny," Frances joined in, "when she did the girl that hums? We hummers wriggled. Miss Ketcham could do monologues if she wanted to. That lecture on 'Behavior in Church' would make a splendid monologue."

"It would do a great deal of good," said Lucy earnestly. "All that part she acted out, putting on her things just before the minister is through. She called it the most ill-bred thing that well-bred people ever do."

"I've always done it, — I've never thought. She lets you draw your own conclusions about yourself, does n't she, though? You remember the day she talked about the hustler's manners? — going through swing doors, and letting them fly behind you, and hitting people's elbows, when you are walking in a crowd."

"Think of the other person, that is what Miss Ketcham says over and over, that is what it all comes to."

"You do," said Frances; "that's the whole secret of you, Lucy. But then, if they are all ill-bred together, probably the other person does n't mind. Miss Ketcham says all ill-bred people are n't selfish; it's only because

nobody has called their attention to it. She says print does n't hurt their feelings, so they'd better read 'Don't' books, and 'Answers to Correspondents.' But she does say, Uncle Ellery, that you have got to associate with people that have *some* manners."

"Admirable woman!" Mr. Tuckerman had been thoughtfully eating his dinner. "What with 'Miss Ketcham says' for three meals a day, I expect to be turned out a Chesterfield."

"Why, Uncle Ellery," said Betty, "I think your manners are just perfect, *almost* always."

After the laugh was over, Lucy turned the subject. She did indeed fear that her uncle sometimes snubbed people.

Frances was by this time firm friends with one May Coddington, who wrote her name Maie until Miss Ketcham entertained her school with the topic, "The Misspelling of Proper Names," when the Mabelles and Carolyns and Izobels looked conscious, pretended they did n't care, and signed their next letters home like sensible girls.

May addressed her friend in frequent notes, "Francesca mia." Each confided to the other her secretest ambition. "But until then," said Frances in conclusion, "I am content to learn to read and recite well, and May, I am determined to do monologues. They shall be my stepping-stone."

"Where shall you get your monologues?"

"Write them! We will write them together!"

This conversation took place shortly after the school had been visited by the most delightful of all renderers of monologues. The girls "went wild," as they chose to

express it. The gifted lady had presented the contemporary social comedy. "But she has n't got us in at all," the girls complained. "Do you suppose she thinks we are n't interesting? 'Immature minds,' I heard one of my aunts saying: she did n't care for the society of unripened intellects. It made me feel like a green melon, — horrid feeling! She won't get much of a Christmas present from me, I can tell you!"

Shall I confess it? There was a violent reaction against Shakespeare in favor of the new form of drama introduced by the lady from Boston. Up to this time the talk had been of "As You Like It," played out-of-doors in June. At the close of the last school year, some scenes from "Love's Labour's Lost" had been given in the garden, and as girls delight in repeating a success, all were for another pastoral play, and one more ambitious. Alas for the legitimate drama when the monologue seized the school! It raged throughout the winter: composition teachers yielded to the craze, and set subjects; the teacher of reading indulged her classes in monologues.

Gradually, a plan took shape, to which Miss Ketcham gave consent. It was proposed to give four monologues illustrative of school life, those selected to be in each case recited by the author. If the productions failed to reach a certain pitch of excellence, the entertainment would be given up; if they fell below a higher standard, the performance would be restricted to a pupil audience; if — inspiring thought! — the monologues proved very good, then might friends be invited.

Frances had now but a single ambition, — to write the best monologue of all, and to deliver it so as to compel the admiration of Mr. Partridge.

The affair of the monologues was what Miss Ketcham's assistant called a "wave." Another that passed over the school this year was the athletic wave, and a basket-ball match with a neighboring school was a matter of thrilling interest. Suffice it to record here that our Betty distinguished herself, and cried herself to sleep the night the other school won the victory.

The philanthropic wave was still another. The school adopted a charity, which provided care and kindness for many little children of the Italian quarter in the city. At Christmas there was a fury of doll-dressing; a sewing class made tiny baby clothes with astonishing speed if not skill; and one Saturday in May, the gardens were filled with the little city guests. As summer came on, each girl had a secret with herself. Their leader had proposed that everybody should give up some one piece of summer finery that she had set her heart upon, and should lay it down for the Fresh Air Fund of their young Italians, should try a little of the "doing without" that the minister had just preached about. The girls looked thoughtful. Most of them belonged neither to the rich nor to the poor; they were of the happy middle class that knows both pleasure of indulgence and pleasure of sacrifice. The leader waited a moment, secretly giving up the long Liberty scarf, that of all things she desired.

"What can we give up? We have so few things," Lucy considered.

"What are we going to buy with our birthday money the next time we go to Boston?—It comes right down to that," said Frances. "With Aunt Plummer's check, I mean. You never could have expected a man to think of our birthdays. It was Miss Rose Allen, that is my belief."

"I know what I was going to buy," said Betty, "a basket for my kitten. I'll just make a little bed in a box."

"That's the way Cato did," Frances put on a fine air of learning. "Cato used what he had in the house; it's a maxim and I copied it." Since Frances had visited Brook Farm, she had had an enthusiasm for the simple life. She was ready to sacrifice her entire summer outfit on this occasion.

Meanwhile, lessons had the right of way, and philanthropy, athletics, and all else gave place to them. Miss Ketcham had various tests of work accomplished. The one used least often was that of written examinations, which she regarded as a last resort. They were to be applied in doubtful cases, which could be settled only by single combat with a set of questions. "Passing" or "not passing" was not ordinarily to be decided in so crude a fashion. Nevertheless, written work accompanied each study, and pupils at the Ridge lived pen in hand. A girl like Lucy suffered not a little, but day by day she gained in readiness and flexibility and the freer use of her mind.

On the other hand, Frances was all expression, and was vain of her fluency. "I'm like the gifted youth the proud mother told us of, who could write on and on without a thought!" Frances laughed. "I'm glad I can see the fun of myself, anyhow."

"As a little exercise in technique," said the composition teacher, "try ten words to express your idea instead of twenty-five. You will have to write your monologue on that principle. Remember, brevity and suggestion." And at once Frances was on fire for brevity and suggestion.

Betty's school reports were far superior to those her sisters carried home, and were the cause of much wit in the family. Miss Ketcham had abolished marks in favor of adjectives; and Betty soared among the superlatives, while Lucy and Frances were pronounced "fair" or "good," and towards the end of the year, even "excellent." Their guardian signed the reports amid the merriment of his three nieces. He saw that Betty was in some peril: she was already under the temptation of the clever woman to keep one ahead, and to assure herself that you know that she knows. Betty had unfortunately been informed that she would be ready for college a year sooner than she ought to be, and had at once reported it to her schoolmates. There was a coolness that lasted for some days. Mr. Tuckerman was meanwhile obliged to invent occasions for exposing her ignorance, and found fault diligently with her reading, writing, and spelling.

So the school year passed, and June came again. The Ridge had its annual season of farewell, with a programme somewhat as follows: by way of a Baccalaureate discourse, the minister of the First Church was expected to divert his sermon at the close in the direction of the side pews, where sat the departing class, and to bestow on them some appropriate remarks upon youth, education, and future responsibilities. On Monday evening, the pupils of the school gave a musical and dramatic entertainment, greatly enjoyed by parents and performers. Tuesday was a day of solemn ceremonial. Miss Ketcham invited some high official of her own college to address the members of the graduating class, and to present them with certificates. On that day the

alumnæ assembled, had a formal breakfast, and made speeches.

The young minister, in his first year at Twinbridge, had had many occasions for shrinking, or, as he might have expressed it, for self-conquest. He had shrunk from his first funeral, his first wedding, — and ah, how he had shrunk from his first christening! He had passed through these ordeals, honestly sustained by his religion, and every lady in the parish had commended the dignity and sweetness of his bearing. But never had he faced a situation so trying as this bestowal of good advice upon the young ladies of Miss Ketcham's graduating class. He turned the leaves of his sermon, and saw the fatal page approaching. He fixed his eye upon the clock in the front of the organ gallery, looking over the heads of the centre pewholders, and to the clock face he delivered a stirring and beautiful summons. The side pews were too moved and rapt to notice the omission. The young preacher had the gift of the trumpet call; it rang through the hearts of our young girls that Sunday morning.

As the summer congregation streamed out of church, one said to another, "I think we have made no mistake in our minister. He always rises to the occasion."

"They are trying their best to get him in Oldhaven. Of course it is a much larger church, but a very different order of people. There is a large factory population, — not a parish of refinement and culture. It is not at all probable that he will accept, especially as we have now offered him the same salary." This lady turned to Mrs. Horace Tuckerman. "I hear he has become quite intimate with your brother-in-law. It is plain

he appreciates the society that such a town as this affords."

Mrs. Horace looked very doubtful; far from finding any charm in her brother-in-law's society, she secretly regarded him as the dullest of all company.

The three sisters strolled home at a little distance behind their uncle and his friend Partridge; for Mr. Partridge's mother saw to it that he went regularly to church, or to "meeting," as that stanch old dissenter would have preferred to say.

Mr. Tuckerman at last remembered that his nieces were in the rear, and turned around. "That was a little hard on us old fellows, that ramming it in about the blessings of youth."

"I felt somewhere about eighty," said Partridge.

The girls would not discuss the sermon, but Betty ran forward and put her hand into her uncle's; for she pitied him because he was so old. Partridge caught her other hand and tried to jump her up and down between them.

"It's Sunday," said Betty. Besides, she would have liked to tell him, she was a young lady in algebra. Gradually and imperceptibly, Partridge fell back to Frances' side.

On Monday evening at the Ridge there was festivity in the air; the fragrance of June roses, the tuning of strings in the distance, and a flutter of organdie through the halls. Guests were shown to their places, where they sat patiently fanning themselves, and studying a beribboned programme. "'Music and Monologues,' —monologues," sighed one lady, "not Browning this warm evening?"

"No," said a mother, better instructed. "They are original monologues, by the girls of the school."

The lady sighed again. "I hope they are short. I am always coming to these things to oblige somebody."

"My daughter wrote one of the monologues that was chosen. Only four were selected."

"Indeed, you must be very proud," said the maiden lady, amiably.

"My daughter is to sing, besides. It is the only name that occurs twice on the programme. You are from Boston, I think," she added appreciatively.

"Yes."

"Have you, too, a daugh—"

"A cousin — only a young cousin," said the other dryly.

"They seem to be thinking of beginning," the mother said hopefully, after a long period of waiting.

There was lively interest in the monologues. The first was entitled "Parent and Principal." Miss Ketcham had said, "If I can forgive it, the parent can afford to," and so made a bold exception to the rule that young people were not to instruct their elders. Fathers and mothers were to-night in high good humor, and each couple took the little skit as a capital satire upon the rest. All drew the moral that many parents might learn a lesson from it, and that plainly principals had their trials.

"Miss Scatterbrain writes an Essay" was fairly well done, and loudly applauded.

"What a relief from compositions on Friendship, such as we graduated with!" said the lady who was a cousin, now very good-natured. Her neighbor's daugh-

ter followed. Her recitation was a rather tame affair, but the cousin applauded extravagantly. She sat erect and gradually leaned forward as the next speaker took her place. She was but another young girl in white, yet before she had spoken, everybody had discovered the difference. Frances' uncle, standing at the back of the room, looked steadily at her. Mr. Partridge, beside him, never took his eyes from her face. Frances could "hold an audience," — perilous gift, thought her uncle, and one opening up a difficult subject. He watched and listened with painful curiosity, for his niece was disclosing herself to these strangers as she had never done to him. The monologue was a slight thing, but her manner of reciting it was quite out of the common.

The assemblage broke up in a storm of applause. "Let us get out of this," was Mr. Tuckerman's remark to his friend. "We 'll turn into my library, and by and by I will come back and get the children." Yet he would have made himself happy by telling his niece that he was proud of her.

"She 's got it in her," said Mr. Partridge after some time.

"But not enough of it to justify the sacrifice," answered Tuckerman gravely. Then they talked of other things.

Frances had fled to the garden, and while the audience were still applauding, she stood by the dial, looking up to the stars. She wished her friends to find her there, and waited. Surely Uncle Ellery and Mr. Partridge, after such a moment as that, would not rest till they found her. Did nobody miss her? Then a little white figure flew out by the garden door, crying, "Frances,

Frances, where are you? There's going to be ice cream! I could n't find you anywhere."

"Where is Uncle Ellery?" Frances asked of Lucy, when she caught sight of her.

"He and Mr. Partridge have gone home, I think."

"And that is what men are!" cried Frances angrily. "That is all men care! Oh, I miss my father so!"

"We always miss him," said Lucy. She put her arm about her sister. "Come back to the parlor, Fanny. They are all saying it was wonderful."

Frances brightened, and was almost herself again.

XVI

THE ALUMNÆ BREAKFAST

THE next morning the graduating class was addressed by a distinguished scholar, who took for his theme "Incitements to Learning." These were to be found, he maintained, in college or out of college, at home or abroad. He may have said nothing new, but he "summed up," said Miss Ketcham and her teachers, and stamped with his high authority what they had all been trying to instil. When he bestowed certificates upon the members of the class and shook each by the hand, the girls at that moment felt not so much the final escape from school as the admission into the company of those who never cease to learn. "I welcome you," he said, "to the fraternity of those who seek wisdom, to the society of those who hold that it is better to get wisdom than gold; and to get understanding is rather to be chosen than silver."

The alumnæ had returned in large numbers; for it happened that on this occasion the first class that had graduated at the Ridge held its reunion, and celebrated its twentieth anniversary. Miss Wynne, the founder of the school, was made the heroine of the day. The ladies announced at their business meeting the completion of the Sarah Wynne Scholarship in a neighboring college. The committee appointed for the selection of a gift for Miss Wynne reported at some length. The chairman read a formal typewritten document, but

broke into her natural speech at the end. "Why, you see, girls, we wanted to give her the most elegant solid silver tray service that was to be found; but we just knew she would n't like it. So we bought this one, and if you don't like it, you can change it. It looks like her, anyway, and that's what you want when you make a present. That's all I've got to say."

It was arranged with tender care that Miss Wynne should attend the annual breakfast, and that her invalid's chair should be placed at the right hand of the president.

The presiding officer of the alumnæ association was a blooming matron, whose home was in Twinbridge. She had been elected because of her energy and her good looks. Both had had their effect in bringing to pass the agreeable function of this fair June day. The charming Mrs. Perry Marshall had had one failure, however. She had invited Mr. Ellery Tuckerman to make a speech at the alumnæ breakfast; on no account would he, was Mr. Tuckerman's prompt reply. "Better ask the chairman of the selectmen," he suggested, by way of getting even with Partridge on an old score.

"The reform mayor of Twinbridge," as the editor of the local paper called him, frankly intended to make his way in public life; and to this end he gave himself one or two rules to follow. One was, do what people ask you to do, and above all, never refuse to make a speech. Therefore, when the smiling Mrs. Marshall appeared before him, with her flattering request, the obliging Partridge at once accepted her invitation.

"Are n't you timid?" inquired Tuckerman unsympathetically.

"I might as well practice on your Miss Wynne's old girls as on anybody. I'll get off a few old jokes, — jolly 'em up a little."

"Lucy and Frances will be at the feast. They have had a special invitation, I suppose out of consideration for me."

"Are they going to be there?" Partridge looked thoughtful.

When Wednesday arrived, the reform mayor was punctual to the minute. The preliminary standing about in a crowd of summer silks and organdies, all liable to be trodden on, Partridge bore with patience and geniality. He was supported by the presence of one other man, the husband of a distinguished alumna. He, too, was to speak. Once seated at the table of honor, between the president and Miss Ketcham, all went merrily. Mr. Tuckerman's nieces, it is true, had had nothing to say to him. They both thought it ludicrous and a little painful that Mr. Partridge, simply because he was a public official, should be called upon to exhibit his talents at a ladies' banquet.

Lucy and Frances sat, with three recent seniors, at the lowest table at the farther end of the long room; for precedence is nowhere more strictly observed than on these academic occasions. There was consolation in seeing through the windows juniors who had not been invited, or worse, had been asked to go home.

"That conceited young mayor is to speak," remarked a blonde graduate, as she sipped her bouillon.

"How do you know he is conceited?"

"All such men are," answered the experienced young lady. "They can't help being pleased with themselves.

If they were women, they would be able to hide it better. See him smiling all round the table, with that carnation in his buttonhole. Now the other man is different. He is Mrs. Campion's husband. I suppose that has rather taken it out of him. Married men are n't half so conceited."

They discussed the table decorations and the president's bonnet; then their voices softened as they spoke of Miss Wynne. "She can hardly walk at all, they say. She is not eating a morsel," they noticed with compassion. "Did you see the lovely tray set those old alumnæ gave her? Oh, not gorgeous, just delicate and plain, like everything she owns."

"She is n't plain," said the other girl. "Look at her face. That is beauty, — that is the real thing, when it lasts so."

"But she used to be plain, my mother says so. That is a great idea, that when you are young, you have to take yourself as you are; but you can look any way you please when you are old. Do you believe it?"

"Is n't Miss Ketcham's new summer gown just precisely like her, such perfect taste and so fearfully neat? I love Mary Jane and all her strict little ways, now they are over. Mother says she does n't believe anybody else would have got me into shape, and now, behold, I am actually going to college. Here is coffee — speeches next. I have heard Mrs. Perry Marshall preside at the Woman's Club," the critical young lady continued. "She gets on too much of a company tone; her voice is too dressy: 'We have with us too-day,'" the naughty girl mimicked.

"Hush, Kit."

Mrs. Perry Marshall rose, and in a high and honeyed voice pronounced a pretty speech, in which she welcomed thoroughly the entire company, from distinguished guests to the smallest new graduate. She then proceeded to her second head: "We have with us too-day—" Kitty nudged her companion as the husband of Mrs. Campion was introduced with appropriate compliments. This pleasant gentleman expressed himself as highly privileged to be a son-in-law of the Ridge. Marrying an educated woman he had found on the whole a good thing. He had not got tired of her; he had always found her interesting, and as he himself had had some of the benefits of education, he ventured to hope that Mrs. Campion had not got tired of him. At least, to acquire an education was the likeliest way not to get tired of yourself. With two anecdotes and a quotation, the gentleman sat down.

Mrs. Perry Marshall began again in her highest and sweetest voice, "It is fitting on this occasion that we should hear from one of our own number," whereupon an alumna of lovely aspect read from a paper for fifteen minutes on the "Spirit of the Ridge." Her sentiments were of the loftiest; there was only the implication that the Ridge alone of all schools was capable of entertaining and instilling ideals of such a height. "Sweetly feminine," Partridge called it, and tried to commit a bit of the essay to memory that he might recite it to Tuckerman. A buxom alumna then made a rollicking little speech, and the company relaxed. The laughter had not subsided when the fair president again arose, and recited prettily, "There is here too-day one to whom Twinbridge owes much." To do him justice, Partridge looked al-

together miserable as he heard his service to the town described. With a graceful flourish, Mrs. Marshall announced that this guest would speak about the "Not-modern Woman."

Mr. Partridge got upon his feet, and declared that he dared not speak about "the old woman," and must therefore use this clumsy substitute. He represented himself to be a bachelor somewhat advanced in years, and now indulging in a wistful retrospect. "Twenty years ago" was his refrain. The not-modern woman of that day had every virtue except logic. She could not have failed to satisfy even Benedick: "Rich she shall be, that 's certain; wise, or I 'll none; virtuous, or I 'll never cheapen her; fair, or I 'll never look on her; mild, or come not near me; noble, or not I for an angel; of good discourse, an excellent musician, and her hair shall be of what color it please God." The speaker continued, "Rich she was, in that old time, when all that she looked on was rightfully hers, and should have been really hers, if we could have given it to her. Wise she was, indeed. Not that she had learned so much, but that we believed whatever she said was wise because she said it. Virtuous, — why, they were all virtues because she had them." And as you listened to Mr. Partridge, you believed indeed that the age of chivalry was just twenty years ago. "Fair,— I don't find any women now who are not more or less unfair. Noble, — ah, there was the trouble; she was so far above me! You are not to suppose that I praise her because she showed me any favors. She never knew that I existed; much less did she dream that I should stand here to-day her only defender among her proud conquerors. When we were

boys and went to the menagerie we stood in front of the lion's cage and said 'Gee, he could break those bars easy if he tried. He don't know his strength. If he did, he'd be out in a minute.' And that was just the way with the not-modern woman — she did not know her strength. Therein she differed from the modern woman: she knows just what bars she can break. There are not many whole bars left." Some ladies looked triumphant; others deprecating and doubtful. "Of good discourse," the speaker continued, "yes, she even discoursed sometimes on other subjects than women. Why does the modern woman want to talk so much about women? I know why I am talking about them. It is because it is the first chance I ever had to talk about women to women without fear of audible contradiction till I got through. An excellent musician — of course. When everything she touched was enchanted, what could a helpless musical instrument do against her? And her hair was of what color it pleased God.

"This was the not-modern woman. What have you done with her? If you have changed anything of this, it were better that we had no higher education. If you have impaired or obscured any of it, it were better that we had no higher education. You have the same clay to work with whereof the not-modern woman was made. The Master Potter himself has chosen the clay and shaped the vessel, and you cannot change its substance or its form. Yes, and He has laid on colors too. All that you can add is the finish — the glaze. Adding that, with such care as to cause no color to melt or run — to dim no tint — with such skill as to brighten the surface and to bring out hues plainer and clearer — you

will make the modern woman all that the not-modern woman was, and more and better, and you will aid the Master Potter in finishing His finest work."

The critic at Frances' table nodded approval of the final words. "What did he really mean, do you suppose? 'Take care, don't spoil her,' was n't that it? He wants to reform everything, even the modern woman."

Frances had sat farther and farther back in her corner, half hidden by a curtain, and looked persistently out of the window. Why should Mr. Partridge take it upon himself to plead for the charm of woman? He was as ill suited for it as her uncle; both were men who ignored and shirked and fled from every woman in their way. Frances had not forgotten the evening of the monologues. In vain Lucy had tried to soothe her feelings. "Sometimes I feel sorry for Uncle Ellery," Lucy had said; "he does n't know how to praise. He misses so much!"

"What excuse is that for Mr. Partridge and his rudeness?"

"Mr. Partridge is afraid of you when you are like that, Frances."

Frances was derisive, but certain new experiences of Lucy had given her insight beyond her sister's.

Nevertheless, Frances hung now upon the speaker's words, as if the fate of woman were being settled there and then. At last she turned and looked at him, drawing the curtain so as to shelter her still more.

Lucy glanced about with loving, happy eyes. She was touched and surprised by the little speech, and knew not what to say.

Miss Ketcham shook hands with the speaker as he sat

down, but she was so much the modern woman that she saw a flaw in his reasoning.

The president's voice trembled a little as she introduced the last speaker: all her manner vanished. "Before we go, Miss Wynne must give us her benediction," and suddenly the president stooped over and kissed the old schoolmistress. The strange thing is, she never would have done it if Mr. Partridge had not made his speech.

Miss Wynne had always shrunk from speech-making, saying she belonged to an earlier generation; the more eloquent was her hand just raised, and her face full of love, as she said softly, "May God's blessing be with you, my dear children."

"I got away," said Partridge to Tuckerman. "When women begin to behave like that — "

"When they begin to be the not-modern woman, in short. You are a consistent fellow. I don't believe you know what you do want."

Partridge was silent. At last he said, "I believe I do know, Tuckerman."

But his friend was absorbed in an old map, and took no notice. He looked up in the course of five minutes. "I take care not to get myself into such company. What did you go for?"

"You're an unsympathetic chap. You ought to have heard my speech."

"The girls spoke of it."

Partridge listened in vain for more. "Look at the way this boundary runs," said Tuckerman.

XVII

FIGURING IT OUT

Mr. Tuckerman selected a trusty stick, while Betty hung about, watching him. "I am going for a walk," he said, and did not invite her to join him, though her eyes begged hard. Her uncle all but shook her off, and Betty had a half-hour of dissatisfaction with the world.

Meanwhile Tuckerman had walked to the edge of the town, and had turned into the woods. He followed a woodcutter's track, and tramped broken branches under his feet, taking comfort in walking noisily and in beating down something visible. For he had come out to wrestle with temptation, as one of his Puritan ancestors might have done: to "figure it out," Tuckerman expressed it. Figures, indeed, had their share in it, but there was a still more perplexing moral problem. The university would arrange a year's leave of absence, — that presented no difficulty. The "Citizen" could readily find a substitute reviewer of historical works. Tuckerman was a modest man, and held a rather low-spirited belief that nobody was much missed in this world.

The aged and eminent historian who wished the younger man to collaborate with him and to spend a year in Europe in research had asked Tuckerman to name his terms for such service. And here again, a modest man would name no more than a modest sum,

—one by no means sufficient to convoy a family to Europe.

A year's sojourn abroad would, moreover, give time to finish the book which had lain untouched for the past eight months. The course of lectures at the Ridge had taken Tuckerman's margin of leisure. Escaped to Europe, he might give his own book a chance, as well as the great historian's. He looked back over the past year with no exultation. Until the fateful arrival of his nieces, Tuckerman had indeed done very much as he pleased. He was a man of simple wants and reasonable desires: this he felt to be his true success in life. He lived as he liked, and he liked his life, "to the core and rind." One must not ask too much of life: to eat one's cake and have it too. Having made his compact, he was quite content with the price he had paid for freedom. Occasionally a married contemporary took him in hand, and pictured the interests and pleasures of family life. "You fellows miss a lot," argued the propagandist, bringing forth a packet of charming photographs to prove it.

"Some achieve the domestic life, some have it thrust upon them," thought Tuckerman in moments of endurance. In still worse moments, he had said to himself, "Why be sentimental about my nieces? why not let the two eldest go out into the world and earn their living? Betty I can easily provide for and educate." He always ended by saying, Not yet, not yet. He evaded a decision; or rather, the Puritan in him waited to be "led." When he discussed the matter with Miss Wynne, she advised another year of school, and begged him to go on with his valuable lectures a second winter. At that

proposition he had looked very sober. Miss Wynne had added that her niece would some day like Lucy's aid as a registrar and bursar, and Frances might develop into a rare teacher of reading. Frances' uncle smiled at this suggestion. He saw the kindness of his friends, but he did not relish it. He left Miss Wynne, with a regret that he had been lacking in ambition in the ordinary American sense. It had been his pride that he was free to be unambitious, that he was free to be poor. Caught in the meshes of other people's lives, what had become of his freedom? So his smaller self reasoned.

That smaller self was a very nearly perfect little being. It had a heart not large, but of absolute taste. It felt quite as it should on a multitude of questions; it was faithful and conscientious, it was sane and just; that it was undersized appeared to be its only fault.

In the past year of readjustment and of learning to live with three young people, the smaller self of Mr. Tuckerman had suffered considerably. He had heard with a bachelor's satisfaction that it takes at least a year for a man and woman to learn to live together. The Art of Living with Others, about which Sir Arthur Helps wrote so persuasively, — this art he pondered much. He perceived that the secret of the art was the loss of self, that that was the clue to life; yet it was long before the perception reached his heart.

The larger man in Tuckerman asserted himself at this point in the struggle. A lonely departure for Europe and a year of solitary scholarship all at once appeared to him a dreary prospect. Truly, the domestic life softened a man's fibre! Had it come to this, that he

shrank from the historian's proposal because he might miss bright greetings at breakfast, and a storm of welcome on his return after a long day? What might not happen to him, their protector, in that long absence? A coward, too!— bad as Sancho Panza refusing noble adventures on the plea that he was a married man! Yet harm to their guardian at this point in their lives might mean serious harm to his nieces. Very well, he would stay at home, satisfied to be a good uncle if he could not be a great historian.

There were compensations: the look of Betty just now beseeching to be his companion tugged at his heart-strings. Frances' aloofness had long baffled her uncle, but the interests of the winter had brought them together. Each spoke to the other with a tolerable certainty of being understood, which is a solid foundation for affection. Since he had seen Frances before an audience, her uncle felt a certain mystery about her, and a remoteness that discouraged him. She had the power to touch, move, and lead, he saw clearly, and though she stirred his sympathies and roused his thoughts, a film of unfamiliarity separated them. Yet a year with Frances left out of it looked all at once dull and cold and colorless. As for his eldest niece, he was sure to miss her, though he was quite unaware how he was taken care of by Lucy. She had heard from Maggie that her uncle had thought himself very comfortable before the arrival of his nieces; at which Lucy smiled upon Maggie.

With one part of his mind Tuckerman was all this time observing what was about him. An ancient stone wall ran through the woods, tumbled and mossgrown,— the old forgotten boundary of some early settler's hold-

ing. At least a century — perhaps two — since stone had been laid upon stone, and the land had passed under civilization. The encounter of the Indian savage and the English stone wall took hold of Tuckerman's imagination; for he never wandered the wood-paths without conjuring up the red man. It was still but a thinly settled country, reflected the student of history, if one could plunge into the original forest within twenty miles of Boston.

"History is written in walls;" how then came these ancient stones here in the heart of the wood? Tuckerman traced the wall till it dwindled away into the underbrush. Boylike he amused himself with setting up some of the old stones, but tumbled them down again, with a sense of historic truth. As time had dealt with them, so let them lie and tell their story. He thought of European walls he had studied, and others in Asiatic countries. The historian was on fire again.

He sat down on a fallen log, and began his argument with himself afresh. The year of research was due to his work, was due to himself. He must make the most of himself, of the years of his prime. His nieces had been restive under his care of them; why not give them their own way, and let them lay hold on the world for themselves? Why set up his aristocratic ideals against their democratic ideals? The sensitive conservative had been now and again jarred by the readiness of his nieces to make acquaintances and ask no questions, and not so much to trample upon tradition as to be joyously unaware that tradition existed. So far from perceiving the reproach of earning their living, they appeared to think it a glorious adventure. Yet all their

uncle's chivalry protested against exposing his nieces to the world. He fancied Lucy in a city office, and Frances departing to her School of Expression. Should he sacrifice himself to prevent it?

One should not indulge himself in too much sacrifice, he argued neatly. It was not modern; it was not scientific. It was to the damage of the individual, and tended to mediocrity. Everybody sacrificing to everybody else would produce a dead level of discomfort and inferiority. Thus, for years, it had been the habit of his mind to plead for individualism; the argument had now come to its final struggle with his larger self. He had applauded his instinct for self-preservation; he had helped other people more or less, but he had been careful to keep an eye on himself. Through the past winter he had succeeded tolerably well in balancing his nieces' claims and his own: now had come the moment when one or the other must give way.

Tuckerman studied the moss-grown wall, flecked with sunlight; he hearkened to the murmur of the pine woods. His troubled thoughts had an interval of peace. The conflict was near its end. Suddenly there darted out from some recess of his mind one obnoxious word, Expression, — School of Expression, — and the nieces had carried the day. The decision drove him to his feet, and he walked off rapidly. "To take care of Frances, that is my charge, — to take care of all of them. I am an old-fashioned uncle, antiquated, conventional, — call me anything you like; but I stand by my womankind."

Another year of schooling and lecturing, — ah, well, — and what then? Never had the girls more needed

their mother. How was a bachelor uncle to provide society for them, a man who hated society, and barricaded himself against it with half a dozen friends? Tuckerman wondered grimly if it would be his duty to give a coming-out party for his nieces. It was a fearful thought.

Some one extols "the expulsive power of the mind." Tuckerman had this power to a considerable degree. The affair of the eminent historian he forced out of his mind very quickly. As he came out from the wood-path, he was placing an approximate date upon the old wall he had stumbled upon just now. He stopped as usual at the post-office, and on the steps met the young minister. One of Tuckerman's traditions was the tradition of a pastor. He held that it is good for a community to sustain a man who stands for the ideal; to meet him on the street, and to welcome him in their houses. Older man though he was, he walked by the minister's side strengthened in the right. He could not have told his young companion the history of the last hour; but it passed now serenely through his mind, and the conclusion he had reached appeared the simple and the only one.

They spoke of the change of hour for the distribution of the evening mail; and the ubiquitous Gus ran into them as he sprang out from behind the livery stable.

"How are you, Gus?" said the minister, and he lifted the boy's cap from his hair, and clapped it on his head again before Gus could wink.

"You lemme be," and Gus, with a delighted grin, struck out at the minister. He hung on behind as the two men walked towards the house under the hill.

"We seem to have reached your door," said Mr. Mathison, as though he had no responsibility for the way his feet had taken him.

"Come in, come in."

"You were going to show me that book, I believe."

"Gus, where are you making off to?" inquired his uncle.

"Kitchen."

That evening Mr. Tuckerman wrote a letter to the famous historian. In a day or two the great man replied, entreating him to reconsider his answer. There was a hint of larger remuneration. The possibility of transferring his family to an inexpensive place in Europe occurred to Tuckerman, but the cost of travel could not be met with his present resources. No; his second answer must be the same. And his answer to himself was still that he was the guardian of his nieces.

XVIII

A SUMMONS TO OLDHAVEN

A FORTNIGHT passed.

"There's for you!" and Mr. Tuckerman handed a letter to his eldest niece. Lucy read the following, in Aunt Plummer's hand: —

DEAR NEPHEW, — Please send me my three grand-nieces by the eight-thirty train on Thursday. I will see you a day or two later.

Your aff. aunt,
E. PLUMMER.

P. S. Keep Laura Tuckerman away for a week.

"Just listen to that," said Lucy.

'Keep Laura Tuckerman away for a week!" repeated Frances gleefully.

"We have an engagement Thursday, Frances and I."

"Break it," said her uncle.

"This is Tuesday, and we've got to wait till Thursday," sighed Betty. "Wednesday will be dreadful."

"The old lady wants to see me a day or two later," Mr. Tuckerman pondered aloud.

"That shows that it is something of tremendous importance. She can't do it without your consent."

"I doubt that; that 's not Aunt Plummer."

"I believe you know, Uncle Ellery."

"Upon my honor, I know no more than you do. Our beloved aunt is up to something, depend upon it."

Nevertheless, Tuckerman did have a suspicion: Aunt Plummer had got wind of the foreign project, and was about to invite her three grandnieces to spend the following year with her. That was undoubtedly what her letter meant; and, hard as it is to explain, Mr. Tuckerman was much displeased with his excellent aunt. She should have spoken to him. It was not the first time that she had tried to relieve him of his nieces. "Now for another tussle with a strong will," he said wearily to himself. Who could tell but, once wonted to Aunt Plummer's, the three girls might never return to him? He believed that might be Aunt Plummer's game. Was he, then, to go back to his old solitude and loneliness, while the great house at Oldhaven was full of life and gayety? Ah, the jewel consistency, what a dull thing human nature would be if it shone brighter!

Wednesday was indeed dreadful to Tuckerman, for he made sure that he had read Aunt Plummer's mysterious message aright. He had thought the historical affair closed, although there had come still another letter.

By this time he was under no delusion about himself: he was jealous of Aunt Plummer and of Miss Rose Allen. He wished to be first with his nieces, and to keep full possession of them. In the past year the fifty-trip ticket to Oldhaven had been exhausted, and a second one had been supplied by his aunt. Mrs. Horace Tuckerman had remarked the frequency of the visits. "They're getting into high favor," said she. She made her own attentions more assiduous, and dragged Gus

with her whenever she could do it. "They know how to make themselves very acceptable."

"Just what do you mean by that, Laura?" inquired her brother-in-law.

"Oh, no, oh, no, of course I meant nothing," said Mrs. Horace, who was a coward among other things.

Now Tuckerman was telling himself that he was not much better than his sister-in-law in begrudging his aged aunt her joyous young visitors. Yet he saw himself, at the end of a year, supplanted by Oldhaven. Possession would be nine points of the law; though, if it came to that, he was after all their legal guardian, and could order them home.

As for the girls, their conjectures ranged from useful occupations to fanciful pleasure schemes.

"She is distressed about summer idleness," said Frances; "it is one of her great subjects. I believe she wants us to open a summer school, or a summer shop, and proposes to furnish the capital. But she is an old fairy, and she may be thinking up some wonderful great pleasure. What can it be?"

Tuckerman was sober and absent-minded as he put his nieces into the train on Thursday. The three girls were as fresh as the morning, and full of spirits and laughter. "Shall we telegraph you, Uncle Ellery?" they said, joking.

"You may. Pay at this end."

"Really? So extravagant!"

"Do it," he said, and went back to a day of freedom and solitude, to enjoy it as best he might.

"I am ready to see them," said their great-aunt on their arrival. "Let them all come up at once."

When Aunt Plummer gave audiences she sat enthroned in a high-backed chair, with a velvet footstool before her, and with her skirt gracefully spread. In this position, with a fan in her hand, she had once sat for her portrait, and she had retained it ever since for all great occasions. That this morning was to be impressive was indicated by the footstool and the fan.

Since the first visit to Oldhaven, the aunt and nieces had arrived at a very good understanding; but the girls were still ceremonious in their manners in the presence of their honored relative. They addressed her as " ma'am," in the fashion of their uncle.

On entering the room the sisters advanced in order of age, each one shook hands with Aunt Plummer, and each placed a respectful little kiss on her soft, smooth cheek, with its wintry bloom. Then the young nieces stood in a row, waiting to be commanded.

"You may sit down near me. You don't have to raise your voices."

The girls did not look at each other, but each thought it was growing rather awful.

Aunt Plummer began with careful inquiries for her nephew, for the minister, for Mrs. Horace Tuckerman and Gus, Miss Sarah Wynne and Miss Ketcham, her old friend Mrs. Partridge and that son she heard so much about, and for several more people with whom we have no acquaintance.

"You will stay to dinner with me, of course," said the old lady from her throne. "We have a great deal to talk over this morning. I am going to give you a little examination in your studies. That is what I have sent for you for, — at least, a part of it."

The girls gasped and tried to laugh. Then it was an educational scheme! It is safe to say that three more disappointed and downcast maidens never sat in a row. A pretty telegram for Uncle Ellery!

Aunt Plummer was a very well-informed old lady, and capable of putting disquieting questions to persons of any age. The girls felt entrapped.

"I hear that you have studied diligently the past year, that you have done your family credit. Miss Ketcham so reports to Rose Allen. Your uncle also appears gratified."

"Oh, does he?" said Frances eagerly. "He never said anything."

"I am interested in your education, as I have often told you."

"You have been very kind to us, Aunt Plummer."

"Tut, tut, are n't you my own? I'm not kind; don't you belong to me?"

Frances was touched, and yet afraid; Aunt Plummer had never looked more the benevolent despot than at this moment. The interview might mean that they were to be despatched all three to a boarding-school next year. She, too, remembered that their uncle was their legal guardian.

"We will begin with geography. A good knowledge of geography is the foundation of general intelligence. You can't read a newspaper without geography. Lucy, tell me the capitals of Europe."

Prompted by Betty, Lucy got through them.

"Frances, tell me something a traveler should wish to see in each one of those cities. Betty, name the chief industry of the people. I will give you time to think.

Lucy, be prepared to tell me which countries of Europe possess a sea-coast, and what waters wash their shores."

Aunt Plummer's language, the girls perceived, showed her own very recent acquaintance with a text-book. She set them to making journeys, in the happy fashion of the modern geography, and her eyes twinkled as she listened.

Betty shone. "We've just had Asia, too," she could not restrain herself from saying. "Hush!" said Lucy, and Frances shook her.

"H-m,m," said Aunt Plummer, "there will be time enough for Asia some other day. And now, what history do you know, if any?"

Lucy and Frances meekly replied that they had studied history the past year, with their uncle's lectures and Miss Tuttle's recitations.

"Lectures don't amount to much," Aunt Plummer remarked. "What is Ellery Tuckerman supposed to have taught you?"

They answered obediently.

"Well, there's no harm in that. It all helps."

Helps what? Lucy and Frances stole a look at each other.

Aunt Plummer was not so good an examiner in history as in geography, but she put a few questions that she had thought of in the night. "What is the relation of an American to an Englishman; tell me that. You may go as far back as you can."

"When an American arrives in London, what should he wish to see first, Lucy? What would be your answer, Frances? What should you say, Betty?"

"What is the Louvre? Answer me that!" Aunt Plummer plumed herself upon this question. Upon the reply a good deal would depend: whether the answer were a palace, a museum, or a shop for dry-goods.

The girls were agreed that the Louvre was a picture-gallery, and their examiner let it pass.

"Now," said their aunt, producing her black satin bag, "there's a slip of paper for each one of you, with ten proper names written upon it. See that you can explain 'em, and pronounce 'em, and spell 'em. Knowing your proper names is what I call general intelligence. I should make girls learn several hundred, if they belonged to me."

The sisters examined and compared their lists as if they were playing a game.

"Why, there is n't one American name among them," said Betty, who was a fiery little patriot.

"That's neither here nor there," and Aunt Plummer rapped her armchair with her fan. "Now read off your list, Lucy."

The girls stood the test about as other girls might, no better, no worse. Their great-aunt listened critically. "If I were n't so far along in years, I'd set up a school." She was, indeed, in her element; for she loved to rule, and she loved to instruct, and she loved to do good.

"I suppose you girls know Greek and Latin in this age of the world."

"A little Latin," they murmured; but Frances added boldly, "I should like to know everything about Greece."

"I 'm going to," said Betty.

"How is it with French and German? You have

studied them and can't speak them. No more can I. That's the fault of the Atlantic Ocean. You can't step across and talk to your neighbor."

Frances was inclined to argue. "But reading French books is something, ma'am. And then, we don't go to France, most of us. We just stay at home."

"Don't you ever expect to go to Europe?" inquired Aunt Plummer sharply, looking at Frances over her spectacles.

"Oh, sometime," breathed Frances fervently.

"I'd get a French conversation book, and I would n't be a dunce."

"Just the week before I went," Frances agreed. "Else I should forget it all."

"Here's one on my table, and do you all three set about it," said Aunt Plummer, with a sudden descent from her throne; "for you are to sail on the Columbia the ninth of July!"

It was Betty who was first able to stammer out, "And leave Uncle — Uncle Ellery behind?"

"Bless your heart, no! He is obliged to go, on some historical business or other, that I don't profess to understand."

"He never told us!" cried Lucy.

"He never told me," said Aunt Plummer. "I happen to be aware of it,—that 's all. And I choose to have you go, too." But the old lady's voice lost all its gayety as she said it. She had had her struggle, too, and made her sacrifice, when she determined to send these three out of her sight for a year, when years were so precious and so uncertain. "If I should live till you come back," she began with a tremor in her voice.

At that what should our three girls do but burst into tears, and cling about Aunt Plummer, and stroke her gown, and kiss her delicate, aged hand.

"What's this? what's this?" said Aunt Plummer, wiping her own eyes. "Is this the way you show your joy?"

"You are so good!" said Lucy, choking. "We can't bear it at first."

"Dear child, you had a great deal to bear in your younger days. I want it made up to you a little now."

"And you examined us, ma'am, to see if we were fit to go?" And Frances laughed again.

"I wish I could do it to all of them," said Aunt Plummer heartily. "Now go downstairs and talk it over with Rose Allen."

"The telegram," Frances whispered to Lucy; "we must send the telegram. 'Sail by the Columbia the ninth of July' — that's only eight words; think of two more. Did ever anything sound so grand, — 'sail by the Columbia the ninth of July'! I'll run round the corner and send it quick. Nobody will miss me."

By the time Frances reached the office, the telegram read, "May we sail by the Columbia the ninth of July? — L., F., and B."

Within the hour came the answer, "If you will take me with you. — E. Tuckerman."

"Shall you think we are very rude if we go home directly after dinner, ma'am? We want to see Uncle Ellery dreadfully. We simply can't wait."

Aunt Plummer's loneliness began from that moment. "By all means," she said generously; "tell your uncle at once. I've said nothing to him."

"We have; we could n't wait; we telegraphed to him."

Aunt Plummer was much gratified. "Ah, ah, have you indeed? I wish we could get an answer from him."

"We did; we have. 'If you will take me with you,' he says."

"Does he say that?" — and Aunt Plummer's voice showed a certain relief. After all, she had been tampering with his wards, and she felt some qualms that she had not consulted her nephew first. The truth was that this old lady loved surprises as well as a small boy does, and refused to approach a subject gradually and cautiously. Aunt Plummer had her own notion of fun. "Now go home and tell him all about it. I only wish I could be there to hear. And mind, he is to come down to-morrow to see me."

A generous and brave old woman sat alone with her thoughts in the great, quiet house, long after the three girls left her.

Mr. Tuckerman knew that his nieces would be commanded to remain to dinner, but he calculated accurately that they would return by the first afternoon train. He went to the railway station to meet them, and took the opportunity to despatch a telegram to the eminent historian.

"What's all this about?" was his greeting of his nieces.

"Oh, Uncle Ellery!" they cried together. It was not till they were all seated in his library that they could really talk things over. Even then they did not take their hats off.

"How did she break it to you?" he inquired curiously.

"She'll have some fun with me to-morrow," he said, on hearing their story. "Do you want to go?" he asked suddenly, with great seriousness. "Have you counted the cost?"

Lucy had begun to; she looked grave. "How can I leave the boys' club? I have got into so many things that I ought not to leave."

Her uncle looked at her. "Perhaps that is true, Lucy," he thought. He continued aloud, "I was thinking of the interruption to your education, which has been going on fairly well. Miss Ketcham tells me that Europe is one of the most serious obstacles she has to contend with. Parents have no conscience about Europe, she assures me. What will she say to me?"

"It might be a good thing to give Betty a set-back," said Frances, "and hear no more of that extra year. As for me, the things I should learn in Europe are the very ones I need to learn for what I am going to do some day. I ought to learn a great deal more about art and beauty." The girl's eyes shone.

"I don't care so much," said Lucy, grown very sober. "I am not so — not so detached as the other girls."

"'Detached'!" said Frances under her breath, and aloud she asked, "You would n't keep us all at home for your boys' club, would you, Lu?"

"Uncle Ellery," said Lucy, "what becomes of poor Maggie? We can't take her along. I must tell Maggie."

"I 've told her already."

"Poor girl! I am going out to see her."

But she met Maggie at the door. She had come to announce a decision of her own.

"Indade, s'rr, I'm thinkin' I'll be goin' to Europe mesilf. I'd been goin' to pay a visit to me sister in Ireland before this, but I thought Mr. Tuckerman there could niver kape himsilf goin' widout me. We'll make a clane swape o' the family, sure, — all but the cat. And what's to become of her, will ye tell me?"

"What is to become of the house, Uncle Ellery?"

"We will rent it if we can find two maiden ladies for tenants. I won't have any others."

"You have got to take your turn and go to Aunt Plummer to-morrow. Aunt Laura is to be kept away a week. There she comes this minute. She saw us go this morning, and she saw us come back. Now, girls!"

Mrs. Horace Tuckerman listened to their story with an air of suspicion. There were four witnesses to its truth, but her manner still implied that it was very unlikely.

"And pray, when do you sail?" she asked with icy politeness. That question might bring them down to facts.

"July ninth, on the Columbia."

"Aunt Plummer has grown very peculiar. You can see the change in her. She never mentioned this to me."

"Nor to me," said her brother-in-law, inclined to be pleasant.

"I shall go to see her to-morrow," said Mrs. Horace. "We always talk over family matters. *We* prefer to keep them in the family."

"I have an appointment with her to-morrow morning, Laura. There is business to be attended to. I would wait, if I were you, till next week," and Mr.

Tuckerman spoke so authoritatively that Mrs. Horace dropped the subject.

She took her leave with a few niggardly congratulations.

Mrs. Horace went home unhappy; she coveted benefits for her son, and few fell to him. Here were "thousands of dollars," as she expressed it, lavished upon this newly adopted branch of the family, while hers, which carried the Tuckerman name, and which should have been favored and reared for the headship of the family, was cast aside and ignored. She lived for her son, she told people with entire truth. She was quite unaware that he was regarded as the disagreeable boy of Twinbridge. His cordial young cousins, disposed to like everybody, had made friends with him. They had considerable pity for Gus, on further acquaintance with his mother.

Mr. Partridge was out of town, and three days passed before he was informed of these events. "Let's all be there when you tell Mr. Partridge," Betty entreated. And so it indeed happened. Partridge listened intently to his friend as he told of the historian's offer, for he heard of it now for the first time. He looked very sober, but nodded approval. Then came the story of the summons to Oldhaven, and the young man's face became still more grave. "Fine for the rest of you," he said with a poor sort of laugh, "but I don't quite see where I come in."

"Oh, you will run over, Partridge, towards spring."

Partridge looked at Frances, and said nothing. She was absorbed in tossing a ball of wool and catching it again. "Oh, yes, yes, yes!" cried Betty, dancing round her friend. "Oh, come, come, come!"

"Would n't that be the nicest thing in the world?" said Lucy, with just one mental reservation.

Still Frances tossed her ball.

"I think I'll go home," said Partridge. "You have quite knocked me over. Give me time."

Tuckerman reflected upon the turn of events. It was a strange coincidence — a little too strange — that the historian's proposition and Aunt Plummer's scheme should have dovetailed so neatly. After that strenuous hour in the woods there was an anticlimax. Tuckerman felt cheated of his sacrifice; and he smiled at life, which abounds in anticlimax.

There was no coincidence whatever; it was merely that the historian's wife had a niece, Rose Allen, who often dropped in for lunch with her aunt, when shopping in Boston.

XIX

A YEAR AND A DAY

It was the tenth of July of the following year, and the long pier was crowded with expectant men and women. Some took the occasion carelessly, as hardly more than the meeting of a railway train. Others awaited their friends with the full sense of the momentous return from the great deep, of the wonderful arrival from over the waste of waters. The most silent and thoughtful were those who looked for friends after long absence. What separation might have wrought, what lapse of sympathy might have befallen them, — such thoughts were laden with anxiety.

"They will never be quite the same. They will come back something different." Partridge overheard this remark, and looked down the bay, reflecting upon it. The crowd were turning their glasses upon a black hull which labored slowly and heavily up the harbor.

Partridge saw upon the pier a man he knew, and avoided him; for a moment before this the Twinbridge minister had arrived at the dock, and, seeing his parishioner, had walked to the other end of the pier. If he had encountered the most deserving old lady in his congregation at just that moment, it is doubtful if he could have spoken to her. No one in that company was under a greater stress of emotion than the calm-

faced young man in the unclerical straw hat. He was to meet his promised wife.

There had been letters: at first about the boys' club, — questions that required an immediate answer, advice asked, and given by return steamer; reports of individual boys that could not be ignored. Gus had been elected treasurer, and was holding his head high; the club had a waiting list; one of the Miss Beveridges was so kind as to play the piano and help at the meetings. Lucy waited some days before answering that letter. Then came inquiry: why for so long had there been no word from her? The letters drew closer and closer together from across the waters, till, on a day she never forgot, there came one precious beyond all others. The first glance showed her that her joy had come, and she made haste away to read the words in solitude. This wonder of love, which so many other women had had, which so many other women had missed, was hers, was hers. Lucy lay still upon her bed with closed eyes, lapped in the blessedness of her love, as she pressed the letter to her heart.

The Twinbridge parish was ignorant of the minister's secret; it merely praised his sermons as more cheering and uplifting than ever. When he set forth to meet the arriving steamer, he had earnestly hoped that he might come upon no member of his congregation. He was not glad to see Partridge, but reflected that a lady from Twinbridge would have been worse. He looked about for Mrs. Horace Tuckerman, but she had said that she did not feel "called upon;" she and Gus would be at the house and see that Maggie did what she ought.

Gus, however, had views of his own. This enter-

prising youngster had escaped to the city, joined the crowd at the pier, and had now successfully ducked out of sight of Partridge and the minister, though he took good care to lose neither one of them out of his range.

The huge black bulk of the steamer loomed at the end of the pier, and swung round, ponderous, into the slip with an almost imperceptible motion. The waiting grew tense on both sides. At last the gangplank was lowered, and the long ocean road came to its turning. The laughs and cries and tears and smiles of tumultuous foreigners and the greetings of cool Americans were so commingled that no one was surprised when the tall young man in a straw hat took Lucy in his arms and kissed her, — no one except Partridge and her young cousin. They were still more astonished when, in the most matter-of-fact and brotherly fashion, John Mathison kissed Frances and Betty. Partridge fell back, put out by these family greetings. Nobody appeared to see him. He and Gus were left to each other.

"I tell yer what," said Gus, with big eyes. But presently Tuckerman had got at his friend, and was wringing his hand. "How are you? How are you? We'll leave the girls to Mathison, and we'll tackle the custom house fellows. Better give me your keys here, girls. Gus, what a man you've grown!"

Partridge, after brief handshakes, went off with his friend. "So you are going to lose Lucy."

"Well, yes, I suppose it is as good as announced."

"I should think so!"

"That will be the way, no doubt; but I shall try to keep the others awhile longer. Lucy wants to take Betty away from me, and I won't have it."

Partridge was silent; he was studying the three girls from a distance. True enough, they looked different: they were in foreign clothes, and in colors, — Partridge, though a man, observed that. Lucy, in dark blue of a London cut, had never looked so well before; Frances had a marked Parisian air; and Betty in cherry ribbons was Betty come to her own. All this Mr. Partridge dimly perceived; but he clearly saw that his friend Tuckerman had been growing stout, and had been in the hands of a London tailor.

"You are looking healthy, old fellow," he said.

"It has been a great year for me."

"For the girls, too."

"Let them talk to you about it," said Tuckerman.

"With all my heart. But they appear to be absorbed in the parson, all three of them."

The girls took possession that night of the quaint little bedrooms with the garlanded walls. "Since the last night we slept here, think of it all!" And they talked till the clock struck one. As they heard voices from the library going evenly on, without a pause, they felt no particular guilt about late hours.

"You and Frances were girls when you went, and you have come back complete young ladies," said Betty, "and I'm not a little girl any longer."

"Ho, ho, great airs for twelve!"

"Uncle Ellery has grown gray, too, and *I* think he looks much handsomer."

"Do you really, you infant? But it's the changes on the inside I'm thinking about," said Frances. "For one thing, we got really acquainted with Uncle Ellery at last."

"I knew how nice he was before we went," Betty volunteered.

Frances took no notice of her, and the little girl turned to the eldest sister. The other was recalling an evening when she sat with her uncle looking out upon moonlit water, with a vague outline of mountains far away. "Are you thinking of home?" her uncle had said suddenly.

"I was thinking of my father," Frances answered, for the first time speaking his name to her uncle. "I miss him here more than ever, because he would have enjoyed it so, and he never could have it." The emotional effect of Europe could not have shown itself more powerfully in the case of these two people; for Tuckerman drew his chair nearer to his niece, and said with great gentleness, "I believe you are like your father, Frances. I begin to feel that I know him."

"You never knew him," she said passionately. "You never even saw him."

"I made a mistake. I shall have a lifelong regret. The separation from my sister and her family is one of the losses" — his voice trembled — "the losses that I can never retrieve. I want my sister's forgiveness. I want her children's."

Frances could not speak at once. At last she faltered, "It was such a distance."

"That was no excuse for my neglect."

"And I suppose you had not much money, any more than we."

"That does not excuse me. I did wrong. You children must try to forgive me." So Tuckerman humbled his pride and did penance for an old sin.

Frances' voice was lovely in its tenderness, as she said, "You would have appreciated my father, Uncle Ellery, because you do appreciate people perfectly when they deserve it, — I've always noticed that you did."

"From what I have learned of him, I should have been glad if I could have deserved his appreciation. I'd rather put it that way."

"He had been a poor boy. He had to earn his living from the time he was fourteen."

"Tell me all his life."

She talked at last about her father freely, and told his brief story: the gallant struggle and the modest success, the great love and the great sorrow, then weakness and death. "It was a hard, beautiful life," said Frances; "and now all that is left of it is Lucy and Betty and me. Oh, Uncle Ellery, we ought to be something *fine!*"

"You have told me a story I can never forget, my dear child. I am glad he was my brother."

Frances, sitting in the flowered bedroom, still saw the quiver of the long track of light over the Italian lake, and remembered vividly that on that night she first knew and first loved her uncle.

The reminiscences of Lucy and Betty had continued. "England suits me," Lucy was saying comfortably. "I feel as if I had gone back to visit my grandmother. I even like the way they set their tables and make their beds. I love Devonshire."

"Oh, we know why she loves Devonshire," cried her sister Betty. "That was where she told us! Did n't he look fine and big and handsome beside Mr. Partridge?"

"He has been in the legislature this winter, and they

say he is going to Congress. He'll have a higher opinion of himself than ever!"

"It was n't Mr. Partridge we were talking about, Fanny. It was Lucy's minister."

"You *are* rather a pert child. Were n't you saying that Mr. Partridge was short?"

"I was saying that Mr. Mathison was tall."

"Children, don't quarrel," said Lucy happily. "I am sure it was very nice to get acquainted with Mr. Partridge as we did in those six weeks he was in Italy. I never dreamed he was that sort of person, — that liked pictures, and knew about them. Why, he raved over Italy, though it was in slang, not in poetry. I never knew he was like that."

"I knew," said Frances.

"He and Frances used to go off together," said Betty, who had a logical mind.

"What I hope," Frances quickly remarked, "is that we did n't interfere with Uncle Ellery's studies. We made him work, did n't we? and took ourselves out of the way. It makes me laugh to think of the chaperones we picked up all along the road. They seemed to like to have us, and now they are some of the very best friends we have. It will be fun to tell the Beveridge girls how we made little day trips with our English lady, and ended with visiting her at her country house in Sussex, and never found out till we got there that she was a great lady and lived in one of the grandest old houses in England. I felt as if I were walking about and sitting down in an English novel. And was n't it too funny that they would call us the Tuckerman-Bells? But the worst was when somebody called Uncle Ellery

Mr. Tuckerman-Bell. Girls, you should have seen his face! 'This is being absorbed in one's nieces, is it?' That was all he said. Supposing we make Twinbridge call us the Tuckerman-Bells?"

"Frances," said Lucy, "you don't suppose we've come home with airs, do you?"

"We shall soon find out."

"Who will tell us?"

"You'll hear from Gus. Gus has done a good deal to train us. Mr. Partridge will let us know; it is the sort of thing Mr. Partridge takes upon himself. 'Airs,'" meditated Frances,—"but we ought to be different; it would be a pity if we were n't." She clasped her hands behind her head, and looked far away.

No more wideawake American ever crossed the sea than little Betty Bell. She saw much to criticise in the way foreigners managed their affairs; and the farther she went the more fiercely American she became. The day that Frances first "swam in a gondola" was the day of a quarrel with her younger sister. As they had swept round a turn of the Grand Canal, Frances had said she *supposed* it would be her duty to live in America the rest of her life, and she should try to make the best of it. Betty flew at her, until Mr. Tuckerman was obliged to interfere. Lucy, the usual peacemaker, was dreaming.

The conversation now continued. "I thought Aunt Laura did pretty well for her: asked us if we were seasick and if we had to pay any duties, just as pleasant as you please. Who do you think was most glad to see us?"

Lucy said nothing. "Maggie!" cried Betty. "Maggie was the only one that shed any tears of joy."

"I know who has missed this family," said Frances. "That's Gus. Talk about improving: he is the one that has improved."

Meanwhile, in the library, Tuckerman was saying to Partridge, "Well, the job is done, and we are safe home. It was a fine thing for the girls."

"How's your book?"

"I've never got a better year's work done, and I've had what the girls call fun besides."

"You did n't tie to them altogether?"

"You should have seen their zeal for my work. Our book, they called it in the family."

"What about it?"

"It's done, sir! And it has been hanging fire for years. Two years ago I had somehow lost interest in it. In writing, Partridge, the fatal thing is to stop."

Partridge laughed. "It took your nieces and their Western energy to set you going again. Good for the girls! When is it coming out?"

"Well, it's not precisely a Christmas book. They can take their time; for I hope — I hope, Partridge, that the book is final, at least for a hundred years."

Partridge was a good friend, for he not only listened, he asked questions; and letting a friend talk about his book is nearly as unselfish as listening to his recital of his love affairs. Moreover, Tuckerman's friend was longing to hear about another subject.

At last he had a chance to ask how Betty had, on the whole, enjoyed herself.

"First-rate!" said her uncle, and went on at length about Betty's intelligent appreciation of foreign countries.

"Lucy, I suppose, did n't count," said Partridge, when he could stop him politely, — "Lucy was what they call 'absorbed.' How did Frances take it?" He straightened himself in his chair, and listened with a keen glance.

Tuckerman was in the vein this evening, and he described the effect of Europe upon Frances with delicacy and skill.

"Upon my word, Tuckerman, that is worthy of Henry James. I have made a psychological discovery, too. You and Frances understand each other at last. Why were you so long about it?"

There was a year to cover, and it was past midnight when Tuckerman stopped suddenly. "Are you going to Congress, Partridge?"

"I shall find out in November."

XX

MR. TUCKERMAN GIVES A PARTY

A DAY or two later the two friends were again in conversation.

"You see, I want to do the right thing by the girls," said Tuckerman, looking anxiously from one shelf of books to another. "They've got to have some society, and they won't have unless we elders bear our part. Last year they had neighbors and schoolmates, and that did well enough for the time. I have an idea that I ought to gather their friends together; Partridge, I suppose the fact is I ought to give a party."

"You certainly ought, — say a masquerade ball."

"I had in mind," said Mr. Tuckerman miserably, "merely a little home-coming party, to announce ourselves at home, as it were."

"It's tolerably well known, I should say; but I see you have the right idea. That is sound etiquette. You have been consulting some woman, — you can't deceive me."

"Now that Lucy's lot is settled, I must consider the future of Frances. She must meet people: that is the only way to head her off from her great idea."

"I understand," said Partridge gloomily. "Head her off by all means."

"How can I do it best?"

"Go ahead with your party, Tuckerman. I'll be there."

"I suppose I shall, too; but I'd rather hide in the shed chamber, as I did when I was fifteen."

Next day Mr. Tuckerman laid the subject before his nieces, who were quite beside themselves with delight.

"To announce Lucy's engagement; the very thing!"

"Is there a single soul in Twinbridge that does n't know it?"

"It is a matter of etiquette," said Frances with authority. Lucy laughed happily, and Betty danced round the breakfast table, waving her napkin. Mr. Tuckerman gave a great sigh, and withdrew to the eating of his breakfast, while plans went on about his head. He had never before seen his nieces in just this mood; it struck him as the ultra-feminine. He should have been an aunt, yet once more he reflected. An uncle in such a situation was grotesque.

"It is an old-fashioned house, and an old-fashioned town, so let us have an old-fashioned party, with costumes that go with the 'bowfat' and the beams and the panels. An historical uncle ought to approve of that."

"That's what Partridge said, — a masquerade ball. Like Romeo and Juliet, I suppose," said Tuckerman ruefully, thinking of the shed chamber.

"And we will dance the minuet."

"Shan't you have ice cream, if it's all a hundred years ago?"

"Ask the historian."

"Who shall be invited? All our relations and all John Mathison's relations, — that's etiquette. And

everybody that has called on us, or been nice to us: that's etiquette, too. And can't we have Miss Rose Allen come from Oldhaven? Oh, *yes!*"

"You will have to have your Aunt Laura receive your guests, if you are going in for etiquette."

"Oh, we should n't mind that much," they said joyously. "But it ought to be you, Uncle Ellery, that stands up, and shakes hands, and says how glad you are to see everybody."

"Could n't we have Miss Rose Allen to receive?" suggested Betty.

"No!" said Mr. Tuckerman so firmly that little Betty wondered why her uncle did not like their dear Miss Rose.

"You will have to dress up as a colonial gentleman, Uncle Ellery."

"Not I!"

They all understood, and pitied him because he was so old. "It's only young folks that really enjoy dressing up," said the sage Lucy. "You never saw a girl that did n't love to powder her hair."

"My mother used to keep some old finery of her aunt's. You may find it in the attic. Good-by. I have library work in the city: you will not see much of me the next fortnight."

Within twenty-four hours the village was agog with Mr. Tuckerman's party, and the ransacking of attics had begun. The girls had suggested that not all the guests should come as fine ladies and gentlemen, but that some should be Twinbridge villagers of a hundred years ago. Lucy herself was to dress as a plain housewife, with cap, kerchief, and apron.

Frances found in an attic chest a quilted silk skirt of the tender green of young spring leaves. There were quaint sleeves and bodice of the same pale green, and there were, besides, laces and buckles and brooches. Uncle Ellery had never thought them worth mentioning before, that was the wonder.

Little Betty looked on and longed as never before to be a young lady. Why not be one for just that night? She would wear a long skirt and have her hair done up, — oh, joy! With her sisters' help, Betty was turned out a charming little lady in powdered hair rolled high and a gay-flowered gown that touched the floor.

The girls worked out other details with great energy. They got possession of a thick book entitled "Social Life in Old New England," and studied it with characteristic zeal. They strove to revive the manners and customs that went with the old house, and tried their best from breakfast to bedtime to fall into the ways of their ancestors. Their uncle was much diverted by their efforts to be colonial. Their historical imagination had been awakened in Europe, and they had returned with a quite new interest in the past of their own country.

Frances took the lead. She conceived the party as a dramatic performance with the century-old house under the hill as a stage setting. Mr. Tuckerman's dwelling was more or less a compromise with antiquity; yet it had been restored with considerable care. In the light of their researches the girls assured their uncle that at last they appreciated it. They repeated Maggie's views of colonial furniture. "Thim ancient

old things is a plague an' a tormint, I call 'em, — the drawers a-stickin' and the sides a-peelin'."

"Maggie, you are a Philistine," said Frances.

"What's that name ye're callin' me? A person of sinse, does it mane?"

"May we light the rooms with candles, Uncle Ellery?"

"If you take care not to set the house afire, or drop candle grease on my books."

Frances read aloud with gusto complicated recipes in the wonderful spelling of old New England; but Maggie took her stand as a Philistine, and declared she'd "not be upsettin' their stomachs with anny such outlandish cookin'."

"They were great for preserves and marmalade and candied fruits."

"Oh!" sighed Betty.

"And cordials and syrups. An old Colonial had a sweet tooth; we'll remember that. But what can we have for a substantial dish? 'Boiled pork, boiled venison, hog's cheek, pork and beans,' — which will you have?"

A few of their guests had proved refractory in the matter of dress.

"No!" said Aunt Laura. "I'm not going to make a spectacle of myself. I've got other uses for my time than sewing on clothes of that order, when so many of the poor are suffering."

"I could n't do it," answered Partridge, when asked if he would not come as one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. "I'll drop in at supper-time. I'm a plain-clothes man."

John Mathison shook his head. Gus was reluctant, but was at last persuaded by Betty to appear as a colonial gallant, "a real grown-up, just like me."

Preparations went merrily on; at length the night arrived, and was chilly, as had been hoped. "For we need the fires to help the candlelight, and we 've got real pine knots."

"Let 's go show ourselves to Maggie!"

"Glory!" said Maggie, sinking down upon the nearest kitchen chair. She took time to recover. "Miss Lucy looks just noble, — that face on her, with the snow-white hair."

Lucy blushed, but held her head high.

"And who is the grand lady with the topknot?"

Betty wriggled with delight. "I 'm Lady Barnstable of Barnstable Hall."

"Saints above us! And the grane witch is Miss Frances. Ah, ah!" Maggie shook a meaning finger at her.

"Now it 's your turn," cried the girls. They whipped out from behind them a Puritan cap and apron, and shook Maggie into them. "We 'll make a Protestant of you, Miss Murphy."

"It 's naught but nonsinse, annyway. It 's not ralely agen' the Pope."

Mr. Tuckerman sat guiltily in his library, with the door ajar, while Mrs. Horace Tuckerman and his nieces stood in the square front entry and welcomed the guests. There had been one invasion of the library: Lucy had led in the young minister. He was in his usual costume save for the neat white bands which his devoted landlady had hemmed and starched, and which

"WHO IS THE GRAND LADY WITH THE TOP-KNOT?"

transformed him into a Puritan minister of the eighteenth century.

Tuckerman looked curiously at the young couple. "Lucy is a colonial type. You are both colonial types: I had n't noticed it before."

The fiddles struck up, and the dance began; and at last Mr. Tuckerman stole forth to look at his party. He nodded to the college lads he had invited from the city, smiled here and there upon the scene, and then withdrew to his study, a little sadly, a little wistfully. He wondered whether Partridge would turn up.

A moment later there entered by the side door a gentleman richly clad in brown silk, with powdered hair, lace ruffles, and shining shoe-buckles. He also stood and watched the dance: Lucy led out by one of the Beveridge clan; Frances dancing with a young sprig of the Boston aristocracy. Partridge shifted his position for a better view; for our friend, under persuasion of his mother, had donned a family heirloom, the complete and elegant costume of an ancestor of taste. To see her son made splendid was probably Mrs. Partridge's first desire, but she had also a kindly pride that he should do his part, and should not be offish and peculiar.

"Go to Ellery Tuckerman's party; try to be polite to his nieces, and agreeable to his guests. Set him an example. You never looked handsomer in your life, my son."

"I 'll have to kiss you for that, mother."

When it dawned upon the company who was the stranger by the side door, the sensation did not in the least embarrass Mr. Partridge. He stepped out and made his bow to the ladies.

"Do, Mr. Partridge, go show yourself to Uncle Ellery, shut up in his study. Bring him out."

Eyes followed the young man across the entry. "Like an old portrait," murmured a Miss Beveridge.

When Frances in her pale green gown and Partridge in his silk attire stood up to dance, then Mr. Tuckerman came forth to see. He watched the pair intently. He was sorry to notice that his niece laughed unfeelingly when her partner made a mistake.

"I'm too old," sighed Partridge. "I give it up. Let's play something else," as the dance ended.

"There's nothing else to play, except conversation," said Frances scornfully.

"I should like a little conversation with you, of all things. I've had none since we were in Italy."

"You see me pretty nearly every day, Mr. Partridge."

"What does that amount to?"

"And you usually ignore me. Of course I understand the attractions of Uncle Ellery. You swallow him up the only time he is n't working. And Lucy is very little good now she is engaged. I've only Betty left."

Betty's bedtime being early, Frances had spent many evenings alone since the return from abroad.

"You never struck me as a lonely person."

"I have n't been until lately," said Frances unguardedly.

Partridge seemed touched. He sat down beside her to consider the matter. "But you have resources."

"Indeed I have. Nobody shall call me lonely — ever. I am quite capable of a life of my own."

"'A life of my own'!" Partridge echoed. "That does n't sound just right to my ear."

"Oh, of course not," laughed Frances. "I remember your speech about the Old Woman at the Ridge breakfast; I never have forgotten that. You talked like an eighteenth-century man then, just as you look to-night. Thank fortune, I belong to the nineteenth and twentieth.

"Not in that gown," said Partridge, with open admiration.

"They had better taste in dress and furniture and dishes, perhaps, — not in women. I like the women of my own time; I am glad I am one of them."

"I am glad, too. I would n't have had you over and gone before my day."

"How improved you are, Mr. Partridge," she said, glancing at the rich silk coat and embroidered waistcoat.

"You can measure your own advantage every day. We men have to go on our own merits. How much better you ought to be able to judge us!"

"Be sure you tell your mother how much you were admired."

"May I tell her from you?"

"Go talk with those other girls, — hear what they say."

"I know their fathers. I'm too old for them," and Partridge settled himself more comfortably.

"Precisely my age. You had better find Uncle Ellery if age and wisdom are what you are looking for. We know you came to please Uncle Ellery."

"I think it was to please my mother, and to show off her grandfather's dress suit. Moreover, I came to see you."

"Did you ever see anything so killing as Betty's great-lady airs?" said Frances quickly.

"And what is this green of yours? Are you 'my Lady Greensleeves'?"

"And Lucy looks like her own great-great-grandmother, with even the hint of the beginning of a double chin, — dear Lucy, the old colonial double chin!"

"You can't make me believe in the 'life of your own,' and all that, so long as you wear that green gown. April green, it is."

"A poet, Mr. Partridge? I never dreamed you were born a poet."

"Not born, but certain things might make me one. That gown goes far."

"I am presently going to put on a big blue gingham apron and help with the ice cream. That will take the poetry out of you! Has Uncle Ellery hidden again in his study?"

Partridge still kept his seat.

"I suppose you will have to let him be," sighed Frances. "When you have lived with a bachelor uncle as long as we have, Mr. Partridge, you learn his ways."

"Do you?" said Partridge delightedly. "Now my mother has never let me develop 'ways;' I fancy I am quite free from them."

"I've noticed that you are getting deeper and deeper into them every day. You always do exactly as you please."

"Well, I don't deny that at the present moment."

Frances gave him a look of youthful scorn, and then laughed at his nonsense.

"Who are all these young chaps from out of town?" inquired Partridge.

"They are students of Uncle Ellery's, and he particularly wished me to be polite to them."

"I see that long-legged Davidge, with the big pile of money."

"You see Lucy is so engaged —"

"Yes!"

"With all the people who want to congratulate her."

"You want me to be off? Well, talk to them all alike, those youngsters."

Partridge found Tuckerman in his study, and there sat peacefully with him for the remainder of the evening, while, as he said, the party raged around them. The girls sent Betty to lure their uncle forth to supper, but the two gentlemen despatched Betty for refreshments, and ate in private.

"I'm ashamed of such conduct," said Frances. "A great way to give a party!"

By and by the fugitives in the study were joined by the young minister, and the three sat talking till the last candle had burned out.

Betty, as usual, summed up in her able fashion. "Uncle Ellery is the sort of man that ought to have had a coming-out party himself ever so many years ago."

Frances flew at her. "If you are trying to criticise Uncle Ellery, you need n't, that's all. I like him exactly as he is."

XXI

THE FIVE-THIRTY EXPRESS

TUCKERMAN looked at his watch, and continued his reading for fifteen minutes longer. Then he wrote his name, his residence, and the date upon a slip of paper, placed it in the last book he had used, and laid the volumes in order with that upon the top. He beckoned to a library messenger: "I need these to-morrow."

There was abundance of time for reaching the five-thirty express, and Tuckerman stopped to examine the veining of a marble balustrade. He had had a day of excitement among books, and he turned to a quiet thing of beauty for rest and calm. He was vividly conscious of his content with life as he walked down the library steps. A little boy was in his way, who gave a jubilant yell as he ran, meaning, "I enjoy being alive! I like being a boy!" It was the man's mood too: "I like life — my own life in particular."

Tuckerman knew he had done a good day's work, and he exulted in it. In going home at its close, he felt the sweetness of reward. It was for the pleasure of going home that he had in the first place bought himself a house; and it is to the credit of the nieces that their uncle liked it even better when he found them waiting for him. They discovered this, and made a point of being at home to welcome him after a long day abroad. They took turns in opening

the door for him. The girls had been still more impatient for his return at night since their year of intimacy in Europe; they had much more to tell than in the old days, and each was eager for the report of the other after the shortest separation. Mr. Tuckerman had fancied himself a person altogether independent of feminine sympathy; but his friend Partridge had never listened to the details of a day with the tender attention of the sympathetic nieces. The girls would have his story first, and drew it out skillfully, with a little dropping of questions, of surprised oh's and ah's, of happy notes of sympathy. So it came about that he talked at last freely to his nieces, — talked as a man should in the shelter of his own home, secure of loving hearts. He had never noticed this, dull man; he had only an unintelligible sense of comfort in taking the train for Twinbridge.

This was already stealing upon him as he crossed the square and hailed a street-car. He observed everything by the way good-humoredly: the August sunshine was tempered by the sea breeze of the late afternoon, — the city streets were clean and self-respecting, — even the well-ordered railway station seemed to speak of Boston "thoughtfulness." Tuckerman passed without hurry through the gate, stopping to buy a paper from a newsboy of pretty manners. He usually made it a point not to see people on suburban trains: it was sheer overflow of spirits on this day that made him look about till he caught the eye of a Twinbridge man, a kindly fellow-being who dropped at once into the seat beside him.

"I see by the paper," began the Twinbridge man

immediately; and his neighbor fell in with him, and talked politics with animation.

"Yes, Partridge is a friend of mine."

"I'd like to see him win. He waked up the town, now did n't he? That improved drainage was all right. I suppose, compared with some of those hustling Western places, we are a sleepy old town. It's a wonder to me Partridge never went West. By the way, you've got some Western nieces; I've heard my wife speak of 'em, — I've seen 'em myself. How do they take to it?"

"I rather count them as Twinbridge girls by this time."

"Like it, then? That's right. There ain't many towns that go ahead of old Twinbridge, are there?"

"I am of that way of thinking myself."

"Not many towns," repeated the Twinbridge man thoughtfully.

"What are we stopping so long for, here in this pasture?" he asked suddenly. "I suppose something has given way. I don't like this: my supper will be waiting for me." He got off the train, and took a view up and down, then returned to his place, and said comfortably, "I like to get out under the trees at night and smell the grass. It's worth some trouble. I'd like to tell you about a deal I made to-day that's going to —"

The Twinbridge man's sentence was not finished.

It was but a few minutes later when Partridge rang the bell violently at his friend's door, and then walked in without waiting. He called out, "Does any one in this house know what train Tuckerman took to-night?"

"The five-thirty express," said Lucy, coming for-

ward. "Can't you wait for him, Mr. Partridge? He will soon be here. Why, something is the matter, Mr. Partridge!"

"There is some trouble with that train a mile and a half below here: they've sent for all the doctors. The telegraph operator at the depot had word not five minutes ago. Don't keep me; it may be nothing."

"Frances, Betty, come here! There is an accident to Uncle Ellery's train. It has just happened, ten minutes ago. Mr. Partridge has gone."

The three sisters were struck as with one blow, and at the first they all sat down and all bent under it. It was their single thought that sad and dreadful things had begun to happen again; that the quiet, happy times were over. Then Frances stood up straight and tragic. "Do we have to have him die, too? Is that what life is?"

Betty sobbed. "Stop, little sister," said Lucy. "Run and get John Mathison, — run! Uncle Ellery may not be hurt at all; he probably is n't. But it's the whole town in trouble — so many come up in that train."

"Oh, let me go to the station," Frances begged. "I shall die if I wait here. Oh, I hope he knew how we cared."

"Don't talk as if he were dead, Frances. Go to the station if you feel better to. I shall stay and do whatever John says is best. We must have things here ready, in case —"

"They will bring him in at that door — I can see it all," cried Frances, her face crimson, and her eyes without a tear.

Lucy, crying softly, went to her uncle's chamber,

saw that all was in order, and brought more pillows and more towels. She looked from the window: there were people running and doctors in their sulkies racing past, and there was Betty, bringing in John Mathison.

"Can't we go? Can't we help? Must we wait here and do nothing?"

"Yes, Lucy, wait here; be ready. Dr. Gardiner is to call for me in a moment. There, good-by, dear."

Frances had gone to the station, but for the peace of her dreams hereafter she might better have stayed with her sisters. Men and women crowded to the window behind which the telegraph operator sat, and from minute to minute was reported among them the news he received.

"No one inside, please. Don't crowd. Don't confuse the operator. You want to get it straight, don't you?"

"How did it happen?" Frances asked of the woman next her. It was a familiar neighbor, but her face was haggard and unnatural, and she and the girl spoke to each other as if they were strangers.

"The Northern Express ran into them from behind while they were standing still. There's many hurt," said the woman.

Frances leaned her head against the window frame a moment. She strained to hear the message. "Are there no names, no names?" she entreated. The report came, two from Twinbridge killed, a dozen injured. But no names yet.

"They've sent down a train from here; it will soon be back. Mr. Partridge was on it. He took the lead." So the word went round.

Frances shuddered. "You are as white as my handkerchief," said the woman beside her. "Who is it of yours?"

"It is my uncle." The girl's lips were stiff and her mouth dry.

"Uncle — you're lucky it's no nearer than that. It's my son. If he's killed, I'm killed too. That's the end."

Frances put out her hand to the poor woman.

"You'd better go home, miss; you'd better not be here when it comes. You're young, and you'll have a long life to remember it. But it's my son."

"I shall stay." Frances' throat was so dry she could hardly speak. She fixed her eyes on the curve round which must appear that fearful train. The woman beside her gave a cry. "Oh, my soul, they're bringing a heap of comfortables to spread on the floor." Everybody turned and looked, and a long sigh swept through the room.

The machine again ticked its message, and the operator turned to the crowd: "Train's started. It'll be here in three minutes. Better clear this room."

The long sigh went up again, and the people moved silently out to the platform. "Better stand back," said the station master solemnly. As the short train drew up, there was a deep silence among those who waited.

Frances held her hands together till one hurt the other. Partridge saw her drawn face first of all in the crowd, and could hardly believe that he saw aright.

A boy rushed past and into his mother's arms. "It's my son! It's Benjy, safe!" Frances' lips moved, try-

ing to say she was glad. She was dimly aware of pale-faced men and women, of tense greetings. There was a calm and an awe as two forms were carried through the throng. Frances saw it all as a blur, — all but two figures, — Partridge supporting his friend.

"Well, my dear girl," said her uncle, and waited before he spoke again. "I think you should be at home, child."

Frances turned to Partridge without a word.

"Some bruises and a dislocated shoulder. It was set at once."

She said nothing, but walked dizzily to the carriage that took them home.

"I told the doctor to come round as soon as he could get away. They all get to their homes, all but two. You say that poor fellow was in the seat with you?"

"Why was it he and not I?"

"It was n't one of the great railway accidents: it will be forgotten in a week, and somewhere else they will do it right over again."

Lucy and Betty had waited at home, perhaps a harder part than their sister's. "Betty, we must have everything bright for Uncle Ellery. It is a little chilly to-night; we will have a fire in the library. Let us keep doing something." She went to and fro in the house with heart uplifted and beseeching. Little Betty took her post by the window, and said over and over the Twenty-third Psalm. Thus it was that when the carriage drove up to the door the two nieces were able to go out to meet it with true womanly courage, although it was a question of life and death.

"You are glad to see him, I warrant," said Partridge;

"but don't be rough with him. Take care of his shoulder." This was for Betty, whose onslaught of affection threatened the poor arm.

Partridge led Frances into the house and seated her in a great chair. She leaned her head back and began to cry. Her form heaved and quivered, and she begged him to leave her, as the sobs came upon her. Inexperienced in nerves, and keenly distressed, he hovered blunderingly about, opened a window for air, and insisted that he should call a doctor. Tuckerman, across the entry, was all but forgotten. Frances would have enjoyed a longer storm of weeping, but she sat up with a laugh. "Oh, I suppose I 'm a goose," and then her voice broke again.

"We ought to be grateful to you," she faltered.

Partridge would not accept that, yet he dropped into a chair beside her that he might hear it repeated.

"We can never thank you enough," she said hoarsely. Partridge knew that he had done nothing out of the common way of friendship, yet he waited for more. "What should we have done?" She had overlooked her future brother-in-law, who had come to their aid quite as faithfully.

"I did get there ahead of Mathison. He saw us on board and stayed behind to help the others."

"The man beside Uncle Ellery was killed!" Frances gave a long shudder.

"I can't get any story of it out of your uncle. He will not talk. I only saw what I saw, and what I need not describe to you."

She trembled violently. "Don't describe it: I see it without. Oh, I dread my dreams."

"May you never see the reality," said Partridge solemnly. "And while we are having national conferences of one kind and another, we'd better have more conferring about this blot on our civilization."

"Mr. Partridge," Frances began with some difficulty, "you have thought that I did n't appreciate, did n't understand my uncle. I know by things you have said. Do you believe now we care about him?" she asked passionately. "Ah, we know at last how we love him!"

Frances did not offer to join her sisters, who hung about their uncle in the library; nor did Partridge hasten to his friend. Much against his will Tuckerman had been forced to lie down, Maggie standing meanwhile over him with a hot dose which he refused to take. Lucy laid her hand on a rent in his sleeve, and with a tender murmur brushed away the dust of the terrible encounter. There were blood stains on the coat, about which no one could speak.

Tuckerman did not talk. Shaken, he acknowledged he was. He would not make light of that awful hour. He knew that he was surrounded by love, and was grateful; but he was alone as yet with his new experience. He had seen Death; he would not be quite the same man again.

"Don't talk to him, Betty," whispered Lucy.

Suddenly Tuckerman spoke in his natural tones. "What's Partridge doing? I want to see Partridge."

His friend appeared obediently. "See here, Partridge, will you get off a telegram to Aunt Plummer before she sees the morning paper?"

"Oh, yes," Betty put in her word, "be sure and tell Aunt Plummer and Miss Rose he's safe."

Mr. Partridge was inclined to talk. "Tuckerman, what was your first thought? You were n't unconscious at first."

"My first thought was, It has happened! The thing has come!"

"Death?" His friend's voice dropped.

"My second thought shows the freakishness of the human mind: Those reserved books won't be called for to-morrow or the day after. I suppose I fainted then. I am glad I did. Partridge, I'm heartily obliged to you." He shook hands gravely with his friend, and the girls looked on at the queer ways of men. Betty at once took the hand that Partridge dropped, and held it in both her own, and pressed it to her cheek. "*Oh,* Uncle Ellery!" she said.

"Stay to dinner with us, Mr. Partridge," said Lucy. "We have dinner just the same, though it does n't seem like the same house, or the same people. I suppose it may, perhaps, to-morrow."

"I can't do it. My mother has waited half an hour already. I'll send that telegram to Rose Allen," he said, looking back over his shoulder.

Partridge met at the door Mrs. Horace Tuckerman and her son Gus. In his anxiety to see the hero of a railway accident, Gus could not be prevailed upon to postpone his visit until after dinner. He had a quite new pride in his uncle, and had already boasted of him to other boys. His mother now yielded to Lucy's persuasion, and to add to Gus's enjoyment of the occasion, they both sat down with the family to the evening meal.

"It's very singular," began Mrs. Horace, "that no word was sent to me, — that Gus was left to pick it up upon the street."

"It did n't take Gus long," suggested Frances.

"Ellery," and Mrs. Horace turned solemnly to her brother-in-law, "I hope you have made your will."

"In Lawyer Partridge's safe-deposit box, madam," answered Tuckerman, smiling. "Set your mind at rest."

"This will give Aunt Plummer a great shock at her age. It is often the way the end comes with such old people."

"I should be sorry indeed to be the death of Aunt Plummer."

Mrs. Horace shook her head dolefully. "How fortunate for Lucy's wedding!" she continued. Tuckerman did not quite follow, and she explained, "It would have been such a cloud, — it would have postponed it, of course."

"My taking-off!"

Mrs. Horace's remark was apparently all that was needed to restore the spirits of the family.

"I should have supposed that your uncle's death was hardly such a light matter," said Mrs. Horace haughtily.

Lucy apologized. "We are excited, Aunt Laura; we are a little hysterical. We are very, very happy girls to-night, Aunt Laura."

"Well you may be," said their aunt. "You propose to be married in September, I've heard from the neighbors."

"Oh, yes," replied the happy Lucy; "everybody knows, since it is the minister."

Mr. Tuckerman welcomed the turn in the conversation, and soon went back to his study. Though ordered by each one of his nieces to go early to bed, he sat late by his fire. Partridge dropped in after the house was silent above. The talk of the two men went deep that night, and strove with the mysteries of life and death.

XXII

LUCY'S "GOING AWAY"

MR. TUCKERMAN sat with his friend Miss Wynne on the day before Lucy's wedding. He was not inclined to talk.

"Yes," said Miss Wynne, "Lucy is young again; the work is completed. She was with me this morning, and she blushed and prattled and laughed. That caretaking, pitying look which was beyond her years had vanished quite. It struck me that her talk was different; it was more spirited, and now and then it was actually poetical. Her love has made Lucy interesting. She paid me a formal farewell visit, since I could not go to the wedding; and Frances and Betty are to come when it is over and tell me the story. We quite broke down when she bade me good-by. I shall not forget her look as she closed the door."

"Miss Wynne, I came to be cheered up; I am taking it rather hard myself. Since that railway affair a month ago my nieces have had a tone as if I had died, and they were cherishing my memory. They love me for the dangers I have passed; but it's not good for my fibre. The sentimental creatures make too much of me. We have had too many emotions lately. And now Lucy's wedding! I am going to attend a protracted meeting of the Historical Association next week. But what can you do to-day, Miss Wynne, to harden my

heart and blunt my sensibilities? I have to go through with this wedding; I wish to act a man's part."

"They are to have it in the church to please the parish. That will take some courage on the part of the bride's guardian."

"I've ordered a new coat," said Tuckerman in an unhappy voice.

"And they are to come to your house from the church."

"I insisted on that for my mother's sake. Lucy seemed inclined to turn it into a church sociable in the parish parlors, for the comfort and convenience of the congregation. Lucy lacks tradition, Miss Wynne."

Miss Wynne smiled. "You and I are sentimental about the past, Ellery. Let us take our comfort in it."

"After all, the mere annoyance of a wedding is a small matter compared with the loss of Lucy from the family. She is a mother to Betty and a balance-wheel to Frances. She proposed to take Betty to live with her, but I would n't hear to it."

"Yet such changes must come in the nature of things."

"Lucy gave harmony to the household. She is a natural home-maker, a natural peace-maker. I have my anxieties about Frances. She is only postponing her projects until after Lucy is married. There is a silent persistence about Frances that is formidable."

Miss Wynne looked thoughtful. "There would be one remedy," she said, and smiled.

The day before her wedding seemed to Lucy all a day of partings. It was not only Miss Wynne; it was the butcher and the grocer, and the very children on

the street. It was a farewell to her lover as he left her at the door on their return from the church rehearsal.

When the three nieces bade their uncle good-night, he kissed each one, and the eldest sister last.

"Good-by, Lucy," he said, and turned away. The girls could not trust their voices, and all three fled upstairs.

"Good-night, my darling Betty." But Betty refused to be comforted.

"I don't like John Mathison," Lucy could just distinguish these words. "I wish he had never come here to this house. I don't think he pr-preaches very good sermons, either. I don't *want* him for a brother-in-law. I want Lucy — oh, I want Lucy to stay at home."

Frances took a hand. "Betty, don't be a baby — such a great girl as you are, fitting for college," and then Frances began crying herself; and Lucy put her arms around both and cried too.

"Betty, get ready for bed quickly, and I will come and tuck you up."

"You 'll never tuck me up again," wailed Betty.

"You will make me the most beautiful long visits, honey. And you are to have the kindest, dearest brother. Betty, don't let me see you ungrateful for such a brother-in-law."

It seemed strange that they should all eat breakfast with fairly good appetites next morning "To butter one's bread and put sugar in one's coffee on such a day!" sighed Frances.

Lucy had become of absorbing interest. They kept their eyes upon her; they watched her every motion. They were tender of her in every word and tone.

"Oh, don't!" Lucy begged at last. "You are all too affectionate; do just be your everyday natural selves. I'm going to be."

"But it is n't every day," said the reasonable Betty. "It is natural to be different."

"Natural to be unnatural is Betty's logic," her uncle reflected. "I own I feel unnatural myself."

"Anyway, I am going to be cheerful, if it kills me," Frances announced. "I've always thought a wedding was the most delightful thing in the story-books, and I am going to think so still. I shall spend half the morning on the decorations at the church and half on this house. I believe the secret of getting through weddings is to keep busy, — don't leave any time to think."

"I want to think," said Lucy. "I want to think all the time how happy I am."

"I'm not in love," said Frances; "my mind is clear. I know we have a lot of work to do this wonderful day, and if we sit forever at the breakfast-table talking sentiment, where shall we be? The Mathison cousins and the Beveridge boys with the step-ladders will all be at the church by ten, and Miss Rose Allen is coming there straight from the train. The one thing sad is that Aunt Plummer is n't able to come, when she simply worships John Mathison. She is more determined than ever to get him to Oldhaven. But the Twinbridge people will never give him up, and of course Lucy would n't leave us."

Tuckerman wondered sadly if she would.

"Uncle Ellery, will you come round to the church and help us?" Frances asked with a searching look.

"No, festoons and garlands are not in my line. I might look in if I were passing, however."

"Lucy, *observe* that Uncle Ellery will be obliged to go to the post-office this morning. What are you going to do now, dear little Lucy?"

"Pack; and try to leave things tidy behind me."

"Don't tire yourself out, whatever you do. We'll see to the flowers. It was a good deed of Aunt Plummer to send that Boston caterer. Good-by, dear heart," and there was another farewell that bordered on tears. Betty was in the highest spirits, and went with a hop, skip, and jump across the common to the church. She never enjoyed a morning more than this one, in which the plain old meeting-house was made to bloom for her beloved Lucy.

Frances went home at twelve, to find Lucy at work in the attic. "So many things have to be put away. Frances, will you see that there is plenty of camphor?"

"Lucy, go and lie down. You should treat the day with more — reverence. Camphor, indeed!"

The very clock faces looked strange to them. "Twelve o'clock, and you are to withdraw from this scene, Lucy Bell, if you are to be married at half-past three. I shall bring your dinner up to you."

"Don't make it so strange, Frances. It is just going to my own, — my home, my love, my real, true life. Oh, Fanny, can't you see how happy I am?"

The old house was made gay with the red and the yellow flowers of September. The dining-room was given over to Aunt Plummer's emissary from Boston, and the family were driven to the kitchen for the early midday meal. This caused so much inconvenience

"CAN'T YOU SEE HOW HAPPY I AM?"

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and merriment that it passed off without any emotions whatever.

The bride's toilette followed. Hooks and strings and a refractory collar did much to relieve the tension of this scene. The difficulties of the veil helped to carry the sisters through the last trying moments. The bridesmaids were, moreover, sustained by their own gratifying appearance. Each was so delighted that she must run ahead downstairs to Uncle Ellery, who was already pacing the library, and then she must run to Maggie, who had sat in the kitchen with her bonnet on for the last half-hour.

"Can the bride surpass this?" said Uncle Ellery.

"The bride is simply a dream."

"I suppose I shall have this to go through just three times," grumbled Mr. Tuckerman.

Frances tossed her head. "I shall elope and save you all this trouble."

The drive from house to church was short, and the veil occupied Lucy and her uncle for most of the way; but there was a moment in which she said, "I think of you so much to-day, Uncle Ellery. I am thankful for you all the time since that dreadful day."

"My dear girl!"

"It might all have been so different."

Mr. Tuckerman walked up the centre aisle with his niece upon his arm, and was dreamily aware of a melodious noise from the organ, of rustling people in their best attire, all turning to look at the bride; and of the length of carpet to be traversed before reaching the flowery front of the pulpit. The ceremonial pace was very trying; although the four bridesmaids were plainly

enjoying the slowness of their progress. Betty was in front of him, and was partly consoled for her loss of a sister by the prettiest pink gown she had ever owned. Tuckerman fixed his eye on the bridegroom waiting at the altar, and felt he should in time reach safety. At least he would not be obliged to make the return journey.

The veiled figure beside him was an unfamiliar Lucy that affected his imagination strangely. He felt the touching helplessness of the woman whose hand rested on his arm, and as he gave her away, his heart said, as a father's does, "Ah, be good to my child, be good to her!"

And now the young husband and wife had turned to face their friends, and Lucy, radiant and real again, came down the aisle with her true love. John Mathison wore his exalted look, and was unabashed; all the world might know his joy. A murmur and rustle arose in the congregation.

"Such a pretty country wedding!" said the lady from the city, thinking of several things she would have done differently. "So simple, without attempt of any sort."

"They are not that kind of people," her Twinbridge relative explained. "They could n't spend money for display, however much they might have. Her mother was a Tuckerman, you know. The uncle looked distinguished as he led her up the aisle."

In the meanwhile the bride and groom had taken their departure, and with the click of the carriage door the old life had closed behind them.

The company of guests streamed across the com-

mon, soon filled the house, and overflowed into door-yard and garden. The air was not only laden with congratulations for bride and groom and their respective families; but all the parish were shaking hands in felicitation of one another.

There were tender women who thought compassionately of the motherless girl on her wedding-day. "Her uncle does as well as he knows how; but after all, he is only a man, and not her father at that. I have heard these girls were devoted to their father. They must have their sad thoughts to-day. I want to speak to each one of them before I go. Well do I remember that first Sunday when the three sisters all in black appeared in the Tuckerman pew."

People commiserated the uncle on the loss of his niece. He was obliged to stand his ground and receive the condolences and congratulations in equal parts which are bestowed on parents at such times.

"You will miss your niece," said the ladies of Twinbridge. "This house will miss her. Is the next sister domestic?"

Tuckerman was vexed to hear himself explaining in literal language the comparative domesticity of Lucy and Frances. Such occasions reduced him to inanity, he was well aware.

"Really," said the last lady to a friend, "I never could see much in Ellery Tuckerman. Rather a dull person, I call him. However, he may be only tired."

"Who is n't tired that has anything to do with a wedding? Let us go home and leave them in peace."

Partridge looked for Frances, and found her at

the kitchen door, dispensing refreshments to village urchins. Maggie stood off, contemptuous of the caterer's men, who had taken such liberties with her kitchen.

"They are every one telling Uncle Ellery how he will miss his niece Lucy."

"Miss her!" sighed Frances, tragically.

"Frances, I want a word with you."

The young lady looked alarmed, then defiant.

"See here, Frances; what are you going to do? Are you planning to leave your uncle's home as soon as Lucy is out of it?"

"I don't know why you should ask me that, Mr. Partridge," said Frances, in the tone that heroines make use of.

"Very well, don't answer, then. I will merely tell you what your duty is, as I see it."

"You are fond of doing that, Mr. Partridge."

"Your duty is to stay at home and take care of your family. Your place is in Twinbridge."

"Do you expect me to spend the rest of my life in Twinbridge? Do you expect me to make nothing of myself?"

"I am not going to argue the whole woman question with you, though it is involved in it. I only tell you to stand by your uncle and your little sister."

"Betty can live with the Mathisons. Lucy is better for her than I am."

"Do you want me to tell you what I think of you?"

"Oh, I know perfectly, ever since I heard you make that speech about the Old Woman. I am the New Woman!"

"I doubt it!"

"I believe in self-realization," said Frances, grandly.

"You are not one of the exceptional women who should make a great sacrifice for their genius, in order to give the world what they owe it. They sometimes have to give up what is dearest to a woman. You are not one of those, I believe, on my word"

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Partridge."

"If you doubt my appreciation of your gifts, here is evidence for you." Partridge drew from his breast pocket a flat leather object, and selected from its folds a worn newspaper cutting.

Frances looked at it silently. She drew a long breath.

"Why should you praise me if you want to discourage me?" she said gently. "I don't understand."

"I want you to see the truth about yourself: what you can do and what you cannot do."

Frances was defiant again.

"Do you care to please your uncle?"

"I would rather please him than any one else in the world, except — perhaps — myself!"

"Then we are exactly where we started; I give you up. Here comes Betty."

"Frances, come. Lucy is going." Betty winked back the tears. "She wants you. Oh, Lucy is going away!" The little girl hid her head against her sister, as she drew her with her.

"I shall not leave this child — not now, not yet, Mr. Partridge," said Frances falteringly, crushing Betty to her side.

XXIII

NOTHING COULD BE DULLER

NOTHING could be duller than this chapter, the reader has fair warning. There now settled down upon the bride's family the dullness of the day after the wedding, and there is none to be compared with it. The fortunate uncle went to the city, to attend an early session of the Historical Association, meaning to dine with the honorable body that evening. Soon after his departure it began to rain. It poured on Thursday, and rained on Friday, and drizzled and dripped on Saturday.

"Aunt Plummer said we were to spend the next day with her. But see how it rains: how can we go?" Betty looked dismally out of the window.

"Look at the state this house is in." Frances sank into a comfortable chair and folded her hands. "The very last thing Lucy said was, 'I wish I could stay and help you to set it to rights.' I was glad she didn't say anything sentimental, — though that was, if you take it one way, — it was just Lucy to the last."

"I don't want to stay in the house and I don't want to go outdoors."

"Don't whine, Betty. Help me take down these forlorn flowers; they are dropping all over the floor. Just get a broom. I don't dare to speak to Maggie, she's so cross with the mess 'thim caterets' made."

"I *almost* wish school would begin," yawned Betty.

"You have enough to do, miss, if you help brush up and dust all the front part of this house before Uncle Ellery comes home."

"I wish he'd come home," sighed Betty, not budging from the window.

"Don't you propose to help me?" said her sister sharply.

Still Betty watched the rain. "I see Mr. Partridge going up the street to the railway station with a suit case."

Somehow it grew duller than ever when Betty reported that their neighbor had turned the corner out of sight.

"Are n't you going to be a good girl any more now that Lucy has gone? Don't you want to be useful, Betty?" Frances scolded. "Be useful and you'll be happy, is what they told me when I was your age. It's about what Mr. Partridge preaches to me all the time. He does n't confine his advice to office hours."

"He must take a great interest in your character to give you so much advice," said Betty squarely.

"Young lady, are you going to obey me and take this whisk broom in your hand? I am nearly dead, I am so tired. I hope not a soul will come near this house to-day. I should like to sleep a week. I am thankful it rains. Betty, don't do that!"

"I know what you are,—you're cross! I should n't wonder if you slapped me next!"

"There never would have been such talk as that if Lucy had been here. What would Uncle Ellery say? He expects manners of you."

"So he does of you," said the naughty Betty.

"I should think you would be ashamed when you think of your sister Lucy that you pretend to love so."

Betty dusted sulkily for some minutes.

"Every chair in the house is in the wrong place," complained Frances. "I don't wonder Uncle Ellery fled. And even when you put things back they look queer. Just because Lucy is gone! Matrimony is the most upsetting thing in the world, Betty Bell: it is far worse than turning the furniture upside down; it's turning the family upside down that I object to."

"The only person in sight is Gus," reported Betty, who had returned to the window. "He's running straight to this house."

"I wish he'd keep away with his muddy shoes," said Frances.

"My mother she says you two are so lonely you'd better come on over to our house to eat your supper. Say, you come!"

The girls not very graciously accepted this polite invitation; but after a long sleep of sheer exhaustion, they awoke almost cheerful.

"We can come home early," said Frances.

"She wants to ask us questions," Betty remarked. "She likes to get us away from Uncle Ellery."

"That's not a proper way to talk about an aunt," said Frances amiably.

"An aunt that is n't a real one," Betty speculated. "I tell you, Fanny, what would be a great deal worse for us than our Uncle Horace's wife, — that would be our Uncle Ellery's wife."

"I should hate her! But he will never marry, neither

he nor Mr. Partridge. They are a pair; they encourage each other in it."

"In what?"

"In ideas about women. But I ought n't to talk to a child like you."

"It's six-thirty," said Frances as they approached their aunt's door. "We leave at eight-fifteen. I shall sit facing the clock."

Aunt Laura welcomed the girls with her usual formula, "Just a simple meal of bread and butter." Mrs. Horace believed herself an exponent of plain living and high thinking; and at least half succeeded in attaining that ideal. She found it of the nature of sport to save butter and eggs, and she was constitutionally averse to taking trouble for other people. "A very plain supper, which you will be glad of, after that unwholesome caterer yesterday."

"We dreamed on some of his wedding-cake," Betty remarked.

"That was far better than to put such rich stuff into your stomachs. Pray what did you succeed in dreaming?"

"Oh, I dreamed flowers and churches and ice cream and wedding veils, but not any young man at all! I guess that will be the truth about me," said Betty cheerfully.

"You must have missed your sister to-day."

"You bet they have," Gus burst in. "I was to their house this afternoon, and every last one of 'em was asleep!"

"Oh, I hope Maggie gave you some cake, Gus."

"She was asleep, too; I heard her."

"How do you expect to carry on the house now that

you have lost Lucy? No doubt Maggie will get the upper hand again. There is such a thing as keeping a servant too long."

"She may get the upper hand and welcome," laughed Frances gayly.

"Well, it was a pretty wedding, a very pretty wedding, on the whole," said Mrs. Horace, without looking up from her work. "I should have been more than glad to give my help if it had seemed to be desired. You appeared to rely on Miss Rose Allen. She's all very well, of course. Still, a wedding is a family matter."

"She is one of the family," said Betty stoutly,— "Aunt Plummer's Miss Rose."

"That's just the trouble," replied Mrs. Horace. "And it is growing."

Frances said not a word.

"Where have they gone, the young couple?"

"Somewhere among the mountains."

"And when do you expect them back? When shall you have a letter from Lucy? Have you written to her yet? How many trunks did she take with her? Did she go by way of Boston? How do you like your new brother?"

Having got these and other questions answered more or less to her satisfaction, their aunt took up the subject of her brother-in-law. She still kept her eyes on her needlework, as it was her custom to do when entertaining family company.

"He is at the Historical Association dinner? Did you hear him say what he pays for such a dinner? One of those wasteful men's dinners, I haven't a doubt, where they have so much more than they need to eat, and es-

pecially to drink. How different women are! Does he come home on the late train? How does your uncle seem to you since his accident?" she continued briskly, having found out not much about the revels of the Historical Association. "Does he seem quite himself? Such things often shatter a person more than they realize at the time. Ellery Tuckerman is n't so young as he was once. I notice he has been getting gray in the last year or two; it's natural. That traveling up and down Europe told on him, besides."

"Why, we had the grandest time!"

"No doubt you girls did. I presume Aunt Plummer thought she would give you that year in Europe before she died, since she did n't propose to leave you much. She as good as told me the other day that she had left most of her property to her charities. She said that every relation she had except one had as much money as was good for them. How is she to judge? I ask. 'As much money as is good for them'! That is what *I* call socialism!" Mrs. Horace lowered her voice. "I sometimes think that that Miss Allen is a socialist or an anarchist, or something of that nature."

The girls protested.

"Aunt Plummer is losing her mind, and her will could be broken. She is under a dangerous influence, and I've seen it from the first, but that young woman is not going to undermine the fortunes of this family. I shall have a talk with your uncle about the matter. Your Uncle Ellery must be warned against her."

"He knows her very well, Aunt Laura. It was Miss Wynne that told Aunt Plummer about her."

"I never did like Ellery's carrying family affairs to

that Miss Wynne. I hope you keep things to yourselves. I have been talking very confidentially to you, I want you to remember now. Gus, don't repeat what you hear."

Mrs. Horace then folded up her work and they went out to supper.

"How did you enjoy yourself, Betty?" asked Frances on their return.

"I don't think it is polite to talk about Aunt Plummer's will."

"Nor I. And if anything could make a dull day duller, it would be to hear that you were certainly not to inherit a fortune."

The hours of the next day also hung heavy.

"How long is this unsettled feeling to last, I wonder? I can't sew; it's too tame. I can't read, even a novel. I tried to write to Lucy. Look at the rain. I feel as if I had just intellect enough to watch it drip, drip, drip."

The Beveridges invited the girls to lunch, and they came home fatigued. They welcomed their uncle on his return with what spirit they could; but all three fell to missing Lucy afresh. There had been a scrap of a note from her which seemed to come from far away. The new signature separated her sisters from her.

The fourth side of the dinner-table gave Frances trouble. She tried fruit and flowers in vain, one dish and then another, and finally left it bare. "Cheer up, cheer up!" said Mr. Tuckerman. "Was never sister married before? We must bear up."

"Has anybody looked in upon you?" their uncle inquired.

The girls reported a number of callers.

"Have you seen Partridge?"

"He has gone away. We both saw him go," said Betty.

"What is he up to? He is a sly chap."

"It's politics, I suppose," said Frances indifferently.

"I'm not so sure. I'll go round to the house. His mother will tell me what she knows. I shall have to guess the rest."

Tuckerman was gone for an hour or more, and the girls found the evening so dull that they went to bed and to sleep, the rain still dripping on the roof.

On Saturday the Mathison cousins came to dinner, and the girls gained the useful experience of entertaining strangers, if they gained nothing else. Yet how could one help liking the Mathison girls when their refrain was, "We are perfectly *delighted*, you know, to have Lucy for a cousin!" Frances yawned as she turned out the lights. "They are such girly girls. They make me feel Western."

The next day the supply minister was a retired old gentleman who lived in the town, and who read with considerable halting and repetition a manuscript he had written twenty-five years ago. "Not much like one of John Mathison's sermons," reported Frances, who had gone to church for Lucy's sake. "Uncle Ellery, you ought to have gone, just for the contrast."

She went upstairs and cast off her hat. "Oh, Betty, shut the door of Lucy's room, and keep it shut! It's more than I can bear."

"Don't go off and read a book, Betty," said Frances after dinner. "There is Uncle Ellery with his Historical

Association man shut up in his study. What's to become of me, pray?"

"You'd better take a book and read yourself," Betty recommended.

"I can't read. Oh, Betty, you have n't learned that there are times when you can't read. You have to live to find that out." Frances sighed, and Betty felt the disadvantage of being twelve.

Suddenly the doorbell rang, and Uncle Ellery was heard welcoming somebody with surprise and heartiness.

"Frances!" he called in a moment.

His niece gave herself a glance to the right and to the left in the mirror, a general smooth and a general shake, and then walked elegantly downstairs. "Probably Mr. Partridge, and I shall not show that I am especially glad to see him back." So said Frances to herself with some ambiguity.

"I hope you will pardon me that I have not called since your colonial party," said young Mr. Davidge modestly. "I was sent West on a family errand, and am just back."

"You are a perfect godsend," said his frank hostess. "You can't imagine, Mr. Davidge, what a week we've lived through."

"Oh, yes, we've had it all in our family. I've had one married, too. I suppose, though, sisters take it harder."

"Uncle Ellery, Mr. Davidge is to stay to tea with us, is n't he?" While the historians were plunged in conversation, and Betty deep in her book, Frances talked gayly to her admiring audience. "I was telling you about

my English dinner. And how do you think the hostess entertained her guests? With the story of *her* dinner in America! It was a returned traveler's account of strange adventures, and I laughed as much as anybody. 'Imagine what they served with the coffee! Really you must try to guess!' In vain they guessed. 'Peppermints!' cried the hostess. 'Fancy the very odd flavor!' said one old lady. Oh, but they are so nice to us, Mr. Davidge, so kind and curious and ready to laugh. They get ready to laugh before you speak, and then very likely you have some poor little remark that must be fearfully disappointing to people on the lookout for American humor."

Mr. Davidge politely doubted that.

At the supper-table the historical visitor showed himself an altogether human and agreeable person. Tuckerman's pupil was highly pleased to find himself sitting opposite to a man who had done some valuable work recently, in Egypt, and who had also attended the ball-game of the day before. Frances sat in her new place at the head of the board, and felt for the first time the gratification of the hostess who hears good conversation at her table.

XXIV

THE JOURNAL OF FRANCESCA

KATRINA, I have given it up for another year. I gave it up once to go to school; and then to go to Europe; and this time I have given it up for very complicated reasons. Perhaps it is because my character has improved, and I am not quite the selfish thing I was. They said Uncle Ellery and Betty needed me, but it was n't quite so simple as that, I suspect. It was on Lucy's wedding-day that they got me to say I would n't; there were so many emotions that it was n't a safe time to make a decision about anything. Ah, Katrina, life is a very mixed thing, or else I 'm a very mixed thing: I guess both. I want one thing and then I want another, and the next moment I don't know what I do want, especially since Lucy went away. Ah, Twinbridge — can — be — dull! That is a sigh, my dear; can you hear it? And I am just now the dullest of them all! It 's the most catching thing in the world.

Well, I suppose I 'd better set things down that have happened, though I go to sleep doing it. The first worth mentioning was Mr. Davidge's coming to tea. Uncle Ellery's historical pet gives money for digging up ancient cities, and so he is in high favor. Katrina, I see why he is invited here; I as well as Beatrice can see a church by daylight. Well, he did a little to break the spell of our dullness. For instance, he takes the greatest

interest in my monologues, and that is something to be grateful for, after my experiences with such people as Uncle Ellery and Mr. Partridge. Those two heard me do one in June of one year, and in March of the next year, when we were all stranded in an inn abroad on a rainy day, they asked me to do another, after some of the rest had sung and played. Actually said I was clever at monologues! Compliments travel slowly in this part of the world. Most of them are paid after the deserving one is dead, I notice. And they would have done so much good on the spot!

I shall get to the Oliphants' party and my monologues later.

We spent a day with Aunt Plummer and told the wedding all over again. She brought out the whole collection of postal cards we sent her while we were in Europe, and Betty explained them most instructively. I could n't; they made me feel so tender and tearful, especially the Italian ones.

> Open *my* heart and you will see
> Graved inside of it 'Italy'!

Aunt Plummer got tired sooner than usual, and we came home earlier. I suppose that was what made me so sad coming back on the train.

I tried to amuse myself one day changing everything around in our sitting-room so that we should n't miss Lucy so much. I put the sewing-machine away, and I scattered the room with things from Europe, and I set up a tea-table by the fireplace, in memory of England. Miss Ketcham was my first visitor, and I told her she should choose her teacup, — Venice, or Dresden, or

London? It should be from London, she said, for the sake of the English novel, which was her chief reason for drinking tea.

Then she made me a downright serious business proposition, and I have great respect for business, and I listened to it. She wishes me to keep on studying at the Ridge, but she wants me to teach two classes in reading besides. It is to be all-round reading: not a Literature class, and not an Elocution class, and yet both.

"Do I know enough?" I said right out.

"You can study, and you have the temperament," was what she said.

I always love to hear about my temperament, and I listened and looked at her.

"I should no more think of putting an irreligious person to teach in a Sunday-school than I should of letting a person without artistic and literary instincts teach my girls reading." Was n't that lovely, dear? "Literary and artistic instincts!" But I am business-like, too. This will pay my tuition and Betty's, — that is the great point, and Uncle Ellery will be set free from lecturing in the school, which, between you and me, Katrina, he loathed. I was the one that knew he did all the time, and now I've got the fun of telling him this. Fancy me teaching!

The next excitement was the return of the wedding party, and their installment in the parsonage. You would think Lucy had been married for the last twenty years; she has all the old married ways. They'd better remember what a Twinbridge wedding caller said to them, "Don't get used to it, my dears; never get used

to it." Betty is so bewitched with Lucy's housekeeping that we can't keep her at home. It is I that am left lonely and dull.

I begged Uncle Ellery to tell us some news. He said that he had heard from Mr. Partridge. He was in New York on business, but was putting up at some country house in one of those fashionable suburbs.

"He had n't been gone two days, Mother Partridge told me, before he sent home for his evening clothes. I told her I hoped she took the camphor out of the pockets. No, she did n't."

I said, "I should think if he expected to be elected to Congress from this district, he 'd better be at home attending to it."

"New York society is too much for him. There 's no knowing what may happen to Partridge."

"He may marry an heiress," I said. "It would n't surprise me in the least."

"Do you know," Uncle Ellery answered me, "I 've had a kind of notion there was more in this than meets the eye. You may be right, Frances."

When Uncle Ellery expresess opinions on subjects he does n't know anything about, he is — well, he is no wiser than anybody else.

I suppose I was cross to Betty. At any rate, off she goes, and throws herself into Lucy's arms, and I don't know what she tells her. Over comes Lucy, and inquires tenderly if I am sleeping well, and what have I been eating that I ought not to have eaten. Then she looks at me and wonders. She had never supposed we should miss her so, — dear, modest Lucy!

"Fan does n't seem to think much of me for com-

pany," said Betty. "I'm all discouraged!" Then we had quite a scene, and after we had all cried and laughed and kissed each other, we felt better.

Uncle Ellery began again at dinner. He laughed a little to himself: "Mother Partridge is getting alarmed. She could n't conceal from me that she fears something matrimonial. But then, she is always apprehensive."

"I should think she had very little to fear from Twinbridge," I said.

"That's it, that's it,— it makes her more uneasy when he is away."

The next Monday morning I began to teach furiously. There are some nice things about teaching. It is a kind of dramatic performance, and girls are a perfectly delightful audience. I read Milton's sonnet "On his Blindness," and I saw Flossie Bennett's lip quiver; then I asked her to read it herself to the class, and you almost heard them breathing. Now they know that sonnet.

Sometimes teaching is a simply delirious experience, glorious, thrilling, and at other times it is mortally dull. Not that I am going to mope: it is beneath me. One has to have a little spirit merely to get one's self dressed in the morning. And then there is the whole long day to be got through. But this *is* moping, — hush!

I will now tell about the Oliphants' party: there is nothing morbid about that. The Oliphants are the rich family of Twinbridge, but they are very nice for all that. I rather pity rich people in Twinbridge; they have to prove that they are deserving. Everybody likes the Oliphants now, though it took some time for them to live down their automobile. Mrs. Oliphant

gave a musicale, and she asked Miss Frances Bell to recite a monologue or two "to relieve the music." This was about three weeks after Lucy's wedding. Now Mr. Davidge represented himself as dying to hear one of my monologues, and as I never will recite anything to a person all by himself, after a horrible experience of that sort I had once, I simply asked Mrs. Oliphant if I might invite him. I deliberately meant to look my best and do my best, and have a regular triumph, for I needed the excitement. They had begun to talk to me about a tonic, and Uncle Ellery, who never notices such things, did notice that I looked pale.

Mr. Davidge was preceded by a sumptuous bouquet of roses, and the house smelt like June for days. I wore my usual white gown, but it had the advantage over other white gowns that it was made in Paris. I rolled my hair low, and let a rose droop at the side. I looked rather well. I had hold of myself firm, and I did my monologues — well, it does n't become me to say. The laughter was all that I could have asked for. Some of the compliments were worth while.

"Why, my dear young lady, you are a theatre in yourself. What a good time your friends must have!" I liked that the best.

"You have observation, Miss Bell," said a ponderous old gentleman. "I see you have observation."

"It makes everything fun if you have," I said. He looked a little apprehensive, and moved off.

"You are simply wonderful," said those dear enthusiastic Beveridge girls, "and we are so proud we know you real well."

"Quite a vein of humor," said the patronizing lady

from out of town. "I said to my daughter, 'Miss Bell has really a vein of humor.'"

"Go right on; don't stop. Keep 'em laughing. God bless you!" This was the old village doctor, and did n't I shake hands with him!

Then came handsome Mr. Davidge, and stood before me. "It was great," he said. This young man cannot analyze his emotions, but he has them. "Where is your uncle?" he asked.

"He is coming to take me home, but he can't bear to hear me and I can't bear to have him."

"Let's make a break out of this," said my friend. "There's a door, and there must be a corner somewhere. I'll set you down and come back for rations." I could n't help remembering just at that instant Mr. Partridge's word for him: *youngster*. But a very agreeable youngster!

"I think you were awfully good to invite me out. Now just tell me how you go at these monologues."

I told him: just listen and look; then mix it all up in your memory and half forget it; then let it come up to the surface, and combine again differently,—and there it is somehow. I hope that was lucid!

He said it sounded like a chemical laboratory. "But after all, you have got to be born," and his face expressed such respectful admiration for genius that I really enjoyed myself for the first time since Lucy's wedding. Here was appreciation that did not qualify and divide and subtract. There was no one to do that, Mr. Partridge being in New York. He told me once that my monologues were delightful for my friends in

the home circle and in society, and called them my accomplishment, since I don't play the piano.

"You ought to go on the stage," said young Mr. Davidge. There is the difference. But he did say immediately after, "I should n't want you to if you were my sister," and that rather spoiled it.

He really went into the subject in a spirit of investigation, as if I were a phenomenon, and the scientific temper demanded that I be explained. Immensely flattering! I love to explain myself, but I'd even rather hear somebody else explain me. I argued with him to draw him out, and we had the most fascinating and foolish conversation, and I do believe, Katrina, — I don't know what I do believe! Of course I did n't take it all in earnest.

A maid came and spoke to me: "Your uncle, miss, is in the porch. Was you ready to go home? He says he'll wait outside."

Then it grew dull again in Twinbridge, although all the winter things are starting up. The Shakespeare Club has held its first meeting, and has chosen "As You Like It" for the first play. When they asked me to be Rosalind, I wondered if it was worth while. I said I would let them know. Uncle Ellery won't go near the Shakespeare Club; he is not to be found displaying his admiration of Shakespeare before the neighbors. Not a bit like Mr. Partridge! He is ready for any part; and they asked when he was coming home, to take the melancholy Jaques. I said I had no idea.

I go with Lucy to a variety of church meetings, and in my official capacity of sister to the minister's wife, they have put me on a committee, — imagine!

Then, the Twinbridge Woman's Club has discussed admitting the daughters of members, and has voted to add twenty-five members under twenty-five years of age. I am not exactly a daughter, but they somehow got round it, and if you please, Katrina, I am a member of the Woman's Club. That would have made my father proud.

"Ha!" said Uncle Ellery, "I suppose you twenty-five will want to carry on the town. You will have to adjust that with the chairman of the selectmen. He ought to be at home looking after his job."

I said I thought if you lived in such a place as Twinbridge, you ought to take an interest.

"I have heard those very sentiments from Partridge," Uncle Ellery answered me. "He is fond of exhorting me. He has evidently tried it with you."

Not by any means, I assured him; I learned to be public-spirited in Chicago.

"Is Chicago fading?" Uncle Ellery asked in a funny tone.

"Never!" I answered.

XXV

THE LONG TALK

"PARTRIDGE, give an account of yourself."

"Ivison and Company's job took longer than I expected."

"What about that country house and the dinners and so on?"

"They are old friends of the family — the Marbles — old New Englanders. You know the Marbles that used to live in Twinbridge? The old man is the same old Yankee still, but the mother and the girls have taken on New York. They tried their British handshake on me. I am glad I don't live there."

"Why not, Mr. Partridge?" Frances demanded.

"Too much luxury and discomfort."

"I don't find it necessary to visit New York oftener than once in ten years," Tuckerman remarked.

"Is n't that rather an extreme New England view?"

"Tell us about the charming Miss Marbles," said Frances smilingly.

"One talked and the other did n't." This was all that Frances could discover.

"Ivison and Company have got in pretty deep, have n't they?" Tuckerman continued. The difficulties of Ivison and Company were nought to his nieces, and they went reluctantly about their own affairs.

"What is that young Davidge hanging about here for?" inquired Partridge as he rose to go. "This is the second time I've met him on your doorstep."

Tuckerman shuffled a little. "He is one of my historical fellows. He takes to exploration."

"After history, is he? He is one of your rich fellows," Partridge grumbled.

"Not an idle rich fellow; there's all the difference. I know Davidge well."

"You think it would be a good stroke to marry Frances to him."

"The girls have no mother," began Tuckerman.

"I don't think highly of your candidate."

"Davidge would be a good balance-wheel for Frances. He would steady her."

"He's a cipher."

"You don't know him. You are prejudiced by his wealth. 'A man's a man for a' that.'"

"He's a cipher. Don't you do it."

"It will not be my doing. Frances has her own views, you are aware."

"Is she encouraging him for fun, for mischief? She finds things dull since Lucy's marriage?"

"She likes him, so far as my observation goes," said the uncle cautiously.

"How far has it gone? I have been away several weeks."

"I could n't tell," answered Tuckerman helplessly. "I am a poor judge of such matters." He spoke so humbly that his friend laughed.

"I am going to have a talk with Frances," said Partridge.

"I fear she will not make it pleasant for you. There is a tang about my niece occasionally, when her will is crossed."

"Consider what that Davidge will be at fifty. He will never be any more than he is now."

A salutary absence had done its work in the heart of Partridge. The Miss Marbles, both the silent and the talkative, had had their subtle share in the revelation. Absence from Frances had been rendered by the Miss Marbles thorough and complete, and instructive to the heart. The further enlightenment of jealousy made his condition clear to him. He had discovered that he missed her beyond endurance. He had a becoming uncertainty as to whether she missed him. He should make it his immediate business to find out.

Frances, it is true, had been particularly cheerful and indifferent in her greeting of him. "You have been fearfully missed, Mr. Partridge," meant nothing at all. "Twinbridge simply can't go on without you" was merely the slang of sweet-and-twenty.

Even when Mr. Partridge said gravely, "Frances, I want to have a long talk with you," she laughed joyously, "Oh, what have I done? what have I left undone? Tell me now; let me have it over at once. If I am called up, I don't want it hanging over me. Do be quick!"

"When is your uncle coming home?"

"On the five-thirty express, though we've begged him never in his life to take that dreadful train again. He won't be home for an hour."

"I hope he won't. It is you I want to see."

Frances had just come in from a walk in the crisp

autumn air, and her cheeks were bright, and her hair flying. There was scarlet in her hat and at her throat, and Partridge had an idea that she matched with the firelight within and the blazing maples without. "I've walked miles," she said, as she drew out her hat-pins. "You'd better have that other chair by the fire, Mr. Partridge; I don't like to have people talk down at me when they are telling me what they call the truth."

Still Mr. Partridge walked about the room with his hands in his pockets.

"Pray sit down. You make me nervous."

He took the seat opposite her, but still would play with the poker and tongs.

"I suppose you are thinking of your introduction. You managed that so well when you made the speech on the Old Woman."

Partridge smiled faintly. Even at the most trying moments it is gratifying to find that one's words have been treasured.

"How has the time gone since Lucy's wedding?" inquired Mr. Partridge rather gloomily.

Frances gave a vivacious account of her diversions.

"I thought you would have missed your sister."

"You get used to missing people, Mr. Partridge. You take up with the next one."

"I gave you credit for more heart."

Frances laughed and disclaimed a heart. She described the Oliphants' party, and made frank allusions to Mr. Davidge. She talked fast, for Partridge said nothing. He poked the burning sticks, listened to her, and looked dark. The old clock in the entry struck six.

"I've been here half an hour," said Partridge grudgingly.

"Not time thrown away, — oh, I hope not!"

"Frances, I can't stand this any longer."

She looked subdued and alarmed. She listened helplessly. Partridge's voice was choked with emotion: "You see, Frances, you must see. My darling Fanny!"

She turned to him slowly, and her eyes shone with tears. "Oh, I did miss you!" she said.

And that was the sum and substance of the long talk.

When Tuckerman walked in a half-hour later, Partridge was still there.

"We must break it gently to him," Partridge had said.

"And to your mother. I pity her; I know exactly how she feels. We shall get on, your mother and I, because we have one great subject in common."

"Your uncle had his pet Davidge standing ready."

"Uncle Ellery a matchmaker! He did not seem to notice that you and I saw a good deal of each other. You have to ask him formally for my hand, Mr. Partridge. He is my legal guardian till my next birthday."

"Frances, have you regrets for that career?"

"One career is enough for two of us," said the happy Frances. "I am certain of yours."

"I am certain of yours. You will do more than half. Together, what can't we do?"

Frances had been taught in a half-hour of happy love the truth about herself and her relation to the world.

"We have been quarrelsome," she said gayly.

"We have settled pretty nearly everything by this time; we can go on now in peace."

Frances shook her head. "We never shall be like Lucy and John Mathison. Says Maggie, 'Now, sure, they're a swate couple, thim two!' That's just what we shall never be, a swate couple, Mr. Partridge."

"I deny it," and he kissed her.

Still Frances reflected. "We have the same taste in jokes, and they say that is a great safeguard. And we not only like each other, but we like lots of third persons and things,—that's another. Then, if 'marriage is one long conversation,' we dearly love to talk!"

"I have always been a rather silent man," said Partridge.

"You and Uncle Ellery!" laughed Frances scornfully. "One by the town clock, often, when you stop."

"We talked about you, my dear; that accounts for it."

"My faults and how to correct them. You know I'm not that paragon you and Benedick were looking for — rich and wise and fair and good and all the rest."

"The very woman, I leave it to Benedick."

"They had a good time, I'm sure of it."

"Beatrice and Benedick? I could swear to it."

"I am thinking of poor Uncle Ellery. I am so happy I want everybody to be happy."

"There is only one way," said Tuckerman's friend triumphantly.

"I am afraid he is going to be very lonely all these years ahead."

"He's got his book."

"What is a book?"

"Well, it is a career. I have heard it maintained that a career fills the heart. I have heard a full, rich life feelingly described, with love and all that left out."

"Nothing fills the heart but a — home, a real home." Frances spoke shyly. "I pity Uncle Ellery and all such mistaken people."

"I like what that fellow Trollope said fifty years ago: the ideal for a woman was 'a quiet heart and a quiet home.'"

"Just what you meant in your speech. Uncle Ellery will be here in a moment. I am going away; I can't tell Uncle Ellery."

"What, you here, Partridge? How long have you been waiting for me?"

"I have had a long talk with Frances." Mr. Partridge still cherished his phrase. "Well, the amount of it is, Tuckerman, you will have to take me for a nephew."

"Give me a moment," said Frances' uncle. "Sit down again. What have you to say? Repeat it."

"Be kind to us, Tuckerman. Don't play the obdurate parent."

"It is a serious matter," said Tuckerman sternly.

"It is a very serious matter to me," replied Partridge. "It is life and death to me."

"She is a mere girl, twenty, and has seen nothing of the world."

"She has had her choice of Davidge and me. Ain't we the world?" inquired Partridge with spirit.

"I have a great distrust of sudden fancies."

"It is a fancy of two years and five months on my side," his friend replied.

Mr. Tuckerman was tired with a long day's work. He was, moreover, hungry, though he did not know it. He was easily made unhappy.

"We will talk about it another time, Partridge."

"Don't say you are against it, — not you against it, Tuckerman."

"I object to her marrying anybody at present. I don't want my home broken up."

"You know all about me; I need n't explain my prospects. Everything I am or have I lay at her feet." Partridge's voice trembled. "I tell you, I love her, Tuckerman."

Mr. Tuckerman looked sadly up and down the rows of books, at his desk and papers, then thoughtfully turned down the smoking lamp, and answered, "Marry her, Partridge, and be happy. You are the best fellow in the world."

"It's hard on you, Tuckerman. I may have to take her to Washington in the spring."

"I hope you will, man. These things must be. But you cannot expect me to be merry over my loss. I have an affection for all my nieces, but I am willing to say that the companionship of Frances is more to me than that of the others." The temperate language of her uncle expressed a sore heart, his friend well knew. "If I seem to lack heartiness, Partridge, spare me a little pity."

"You have so many interests," but the older man gave him such a dreary look that he stopped short.

Very tenderly her uncle received Frances, though he was diffident of the language of romance. A special consideration for her, as though she were passing out of his sight into a grave and mystic experience, marked his behavior to her. Frances understood, and when he placed a chair for her, she thanked him with eyes full of love, and disconcerted him by kissing him, and pleading, "Don't take it so hard, dear Uncle Ellery."

XXVI

THE TRANSITORINESS OF NIECES

AGAIN the neighbors took up the subject of the Tuckerman-Bells, and gratified themselves with much pleasant gossip.

"I hear that now the second niece is engaged," said a mother of daughters. "A second young man from this town has taken a girl from abroad. There is always a fascination, a novelty, about strangers, I suppose."

"What a relief to Ellery Tuckerman to have his quiet life restored to him! Of course the little girl will live with one of the sisters. He will have his home to himself again."

"I have had a great deal of sympathy for Mr. Tuckerman, used to the quiet ways of Twinbridge — to have such a wholly different element introduced," said the first lady compassionately.

Said another, "My husband took me to hear one of Sam Partridge's political speeches in Boston. She was there; and it was pretty to watch her. He really was eloquent. I had n't supposed he had it in him, just seeing him come into church behind his mother."

"How does she take it?"

There were two opinions.

"She knew it had to come, so she bears it like the woman she is. Mrs. Partridge is a strong Christian character."

"I heard that she was crushed. Then I heard that the girl herself told her how she pitied her, and sympathized with her to such an extent that they wept in each other's arms. I thought myself it was rather ridiculous. What a conceit of himself such conduct must give that young man!"

"She is probably disappointed that he did n't marry a girl of means, with his talent and his future."

"I know you admire Sam Partridge. Well, so do I, but I can't help remembering when he was a boy and kept chickens that ran all over our place Now they talk as if he were going to be President some day. She has what will be worth as much to him as money, however."

"Then you like Frances Bell. I like her, too; she gives me such a smile across the church, long before we meet in the aisle."

"That is just what I mean. That is the thing that will be worth more to him than money; just as her sister Lucy in a different way is the very helpmeet for a minister."

"She is beloved already in the parish," said the authority among them.

"We may lose her, along with her husband. Oldhaven is making another effort for Mr. Mathison. He is greatly drawn by the newly arrived foreigners. We are too old and comfortable and respectable in Twinbridge for these ardent young souls."

"That is a false view," these good ladies agreed.

The rumor that John Mathison was considering his second call to Oldhaven was well founded, and on the following Sunday he announced from the pulpit the decision he had reached.

Tuckerman had argued the matter with his nephew. John Mathison was a fastidious and reserved man who did not make common the language of religion; but he said now to his friend, "I have tried to see it as my Master might."

"That's the best way to look at things, Mathison. Our good mothers were right about it." And the two men said no more.

Election day brought another decision.

"Will you go with me to Washington, Frances?" entreated Partridge.

"Ask my guardian."

"But I ask you. What do you say?"

> "And all my fortunes at thy foot I'll lay,
> And follow thee my lord, throughout the world."

"That has a pretty sound. Do you mean it?"

"Just as much as ever that girl Juliet did."

"Frances!"

"Uncle Ellery must give his consent, but so far as the village is concerned, let us elope. You said so long ago."

"Did I, indeed?"

Then Frances went to her uncle, and said, "Dear Uncle Ellery, will you give your consent to two things? One is that I shall leave you soon — Uncle Ellery — and the other is that I shall have a very unconventional wedding."

"That last, with all my heart. Go to the minister's study, why don't you? But tell Sam Partridge I would rather you had a year's engagement."

"Think of his going to Washington all alone!"

"He can take his mother. She likes to travel."

"We might take her, too. Mrs. Partridge has lots of fun in her, Uncle Ellery. She laughs at her son and his sweetheart."

"That's healthy," said Uncle Ellery.

"Well, guardian?"

"Frances, there is a dignity to be observed."

"But you don't enjoy a long-drawn-out wedding, I remember very well."

"Moreover, I want you here. We have just let Lucy go; this is too much."

"It is the way things happen. They react, Uncle Ellery." His niece paused, and smiled inscrutably.

"I can't spare you."

"We might submit it to arbitration, Uncle Ellery."

"To Partridge, eh?"

"To Miss Sarah Wynne."

"Go and talk with her. She will convince you."

Frances returned with Miss Wynne's counsel. "She says if he were not going to Washington, she should agree with you. She tells me to go with him."

"Ah, but I know Sam Partridge better than she does. You can trust him."

"I know him better than either of you," cried Frances. "*Trust* him! Uncle Ellery," said the girl, lowering her voice, "I think of my father and my mother, and how few years they had. Oh, it is because the time together anyway is so short,—one *has* to die first,—you can't help thinking of that the moment you are engaged, Uncle Ellery!"

Mr. Tuckerman did not smile; he looked unhappy, and rose and walked about the room. "I like a quiet

home, without these disturbances, which you call by such pretty names. Well, leave me Betty, and you and Partridge may visit the minister's study whenever you see fit."

"Let us stand up and be married right on the hearth-rug in this dear library, Uncle Ellery, with John Mathison to do it, and you and the girls and Mother Partridge, — the day we start for Washington."

"Your Aunt Laura and Gus."

"And Miss Rose Allen, of course."

The wedding of Frances was in truth very nearly as simple as this.

After the departure of the bride and groom, Tuckerman returned to his library, opened his penknife, and cut the string about a large package of books. He had known them to be the publishers' presentation copies of his own work, but they had stood untouched for two days. This was due in part to the writer's dread of his own printed page, but even more to the languor and sadness that accompanied the parting with his niece. At last he held in his hand the spare dark blue volume. He opened the book and read page after page. The first reluctance overcome, he felt, like every other author, the horrid fascination of his own writing. He discovered with bitterness the misprint of a proper name; saw a sentence that would stand askew for all time; and worse, he discovered one that could well have been omitted. Never would he open the book again when once he had searched it for errors. He glanced at the twelve volumes, awaiting the dubious fate of presentation copies.

As he turned the leaves, however, he felt more kindly towards the slender book. Its modest size gratified

him; its fair page gave him back his words fresh and clear. He fell to thinking of the relation of a man to his book and to the strangers who may chance to read it, — one of the mystical relations of human life. Henceforth he must turn again to such shadowy companionship, to fill the place of the living, breathing, loving young creatures that had been about him.

Tuckerman had made at a late day the discovery of his own nature. He sat now by an unlighted fire, and saw its symbolism. "I am a helplessly, hopelessly, miserably domestic man. My home and my family are all the world to me, is the grim truth. And what have I left? Not even Partridge to drop in upon me. And now they tell me I must give up my little girl." His eye fell upon a valentine that decorated his desk, sent him with great secrecy by Betty.

The evil smell of a lamp going out deepened the cheerlessness. "Maggie," he called, "this lamp needs filling."

"Och, did it go out on ye? It's all because of this day's doin's."

"You need not bring it back," he said gloomily. He was sitting in the half-light that came from the entry lamp when the front door burst open, and Betty came in with a rush.

"Oh, Uncle Ellery," she cried, "I would n't stay at Lucy's. They meant me to stay all night. Why don't you have a lamp? And why don't you light the fire? Give me the match-box, quick."

Betty prattled and nestled and laughed. Then she was silent, preparing herself to speak.

"Lucy and Frances talked to me. Although I am

twelve years old, and in the grade above my age, *they* say I am young; they call me a little girl. They say I need them for my mothers."

"Ah, Betty, Betty!" Uncle Ellery stroked his little niece's hair.

Betty gave his arm a squeeze. "You know," she said, "a mother is just your greatest *comfort*, if you are a little boy or a little girl."

"Yes, Betty, I remember."

"Of course your oldest sister is n't quite; but Lucy was, almost, because when I was a baby she took care of me. So Lucy says I must live with her. I am going to keep Frances to visit."

"How do you dispose of me?"

"We shall all visit you. You must keep plates on for us."

"I have not a word to say, my child. Go to Lucy if you wish to; but I feel like a lonely old man."

Then Betty petted her uncle, and told him he was handsome and youthful and should marry a beautiful young lady. "There's nobody to make me go to bed," said Betty comfortably. "I'm going to sit up and talk."

"The very reason, you see, that you must go to your sister. But sit up to-night. I need somebody to talk to me."

"It's nine o'clock," said Betty gleefully. She grew retrospective. "Do you remember when you came to meet us, and we did n't know which man you were — the idea! I should know the first minute that you were an uncle!"

"Pray tell me, what are the signs?"

"Well, an uncle is more amused than a father. Then, he is afraid you won't think he is kind, so he is extra-kind. He is a little bit gray, and he has a little bald spot. That's an uncle! Then, too, he is always thinking about your education, and he criticises your manners. An uncle has more ideas about bringing up children than just a father has. But I don't — suppose — he loves you *quite* so much."

"Perhaps," said Tuckerman humbly and sadly.

"But you have brought us up considerably; Frances said so. You ought to have heard what Frances said just before she went away."

"Why did n't she say it to me?"

"She was afraid she would cry if she did. She said you had done exactly what our father wished for us, — that was it."

"I am glad Frances said that. I thank her for that. But she must not forget Aunt Plummer."

"I know what I'd rather be than anything else in the world," and Betty dropped her voice confidentially. "I'd like to be a fairy godmother!"

"If your Nebraska lands come up, you can be a regular Aunt Plummer by the time you are seventy. I am glad all three of my nieces have an idea that they are in this world to make other people happy, — that that is a part of it, at any rate."

"Lucy especially," Betty answered.

"You have made your uncle happy, for one." For which Betty gave his coat-sleeve another squeeze.

She continued her reminiscences. "Oh, it seems ten hundred years ago when you took us to see Miss Sarah Wynne and the sun-dial, and we went to supper at Aunt

Laura's and got caught in the pantry. I remember every single thing those first days. The first *great* thing was going to visit Aunt Plummer. And then Maggie got sick, and I wiped dishes and dusted and made cookies for three weeks. After that I don't remember so well: it was school a whole year and Europe a whole year. Then you were almost killed, — that was the very greatest thing that ever happened, Uncle Ellery." Little Betty stopped with a sob.

"You are tired, child. We have had too many emotions. You and I ought to go to work again," said her uncle gently.

"Miss Rose Allen put her arms round me, and let me cry as long as I wanted to, when Frances went. You don't know how dear Miss Rose Allen is."

"I have n't had your advantages for knowing."

"And now we are all gone and it is the end." Betty lingered among emotions.

"Come, Betty, you must help me to brace up."

"What is that great pile of dark blue books that I see?" was her reply.

"Examine them."

Betty gave a scream of delight. "It's the book! It's the book! It's our book!" She declaimed the title-page triumphantly, dancing around the room.

"Come here, and I will write your name in that very copy."

"'With the regards of the author,' Uncle Ellery. Oh, what will the other girls say?"

"Bring me two more for your sisters."

"And one for your nephew."

"I was n't aware he had gone into this subject."

Betty looked hurt, but said nothing.

"Mathison wants him sent away to school."

"When we are all gone away and there is nobody, Uncle Ellery—"

"I might take up with Gus, eh?"

"Oh, do!" cried Betty, aglow with the certainty that she was doing good.

"He must mend his manners, then."

"He has very good manners when he is n't ashamed to show them. He would rather have you think he had bad manners."

"That is a little too subtle for me, Betty."

"You see the only people he really liked and that liked him were bad boys," said Betty impressively.

"I perfectly comprehend that."

"Then, after we came he liked us a little."

"That, too, I comprehend. You little Westerners were cordial and sympathetic, like the bad boys. Betty, my dear, I will take pains to get acquainted with my nephew for your sake. I wish you would make him go in for athletics. He eats candy; he 's lazy, too."

"What you think is laziness is because he knows people don't like him very well, — so he stands round and does n't do anything."

"Well, don't divide your candy with him. It 's not manly to take a girl's candy."

"It 's because I make him."

"The less the better for both of you."

Betty shook her head wonderingly at middle age. "Oh, dear, I must go to bed sometime," she said, delighted to see that it was past ten o'clock.

With the good-night kiss, Betty threw her arms around her uncle's neck and declared she would live with nobody but him. Was n't he her guardian? Could n't he decide?

Uncle Ellery would not answer.

XXVII

END AND BEGINNING

ELLERY TUCKERMAN looked out upon the exquisite earth this April morning, took in its scents and sounds, and filled his heart with its mysterious sweetness. "Why sigh for youth, if the earth is young for us once a year to the end of life?" One time he had said, "What need have I of youth if these three girls are young for me?"

April led his thoughts to his young nieces. That had, indeed, been a strange experience of springtime, begun one month of May, and ended by the third return of April.

It was early on a Sunday morning; for Tuckerman had been bidden to Oldhaven to attend church, and to dine with his aunt. He ate his solitary breakfast with Maggie standing over him.

"There'll be no dinner to get, and I'll be goin' to me cousin's, where there's young folks a plinty. Will yez be seein' Miss Betty this day? Tell her, thin, she be a great girl to be stayin' away so long from Twinbridge. Ask her, now, whin is she comin' to see us? The garden is goin' to miss thim all three. 'T was Miss Frances was always amongst the flowers."

"The muffins."

"Some day ye'll see yer niece Frances a great lady. Mr. Partridge had always a joke to crack wid me. He

did n't git the better iv me, not aften. All the Irish in town is for Mr. Partridge, body and sowl."

"I know you are a great politician, Maggie." Mr. Tuckerman looked at his watch.

"You 're goin' again to Oldhaven, s 'rr? Is the old lady failin'? The neighbors was askin' me."

"The neighbors —" began Mr. Tuckerman.

He went on his way, still thinking of the power of April and young nieces to renew one's heart. The fields had become suddenly emerald in the past week, and the trees a mist of green. *April*— he lingered over the bewitching syllables, the word itself forever young!

He dutifully accompanied Aunt Plummer to church, and to her conspicuous front pew, but he still watched through the clear glass of the meeting-house window an elm-tree powdered with green. And while he listened to John Mathison and observed that he was a growing man, he was still filled with the joy of the earth and the morning.

"Very slowly," said Aunt Plummer, as her nephew led her out of church. "My breath is a little short. It is rather a long step," she said as he put her into her carriage. "I must rest when I get home. I am growing old, Ellery."

"Not to-day, Aunt Plummer. No one is growing old to-day!"

After dinner she was quite herself again. She took her nephew's arm and walked into the garden, talking affectionately of the crocuses and daffodils. He placed a chair for her in the sunshine, and wrapped a heavy rug about her.

"I wish I could get you to tell me, Aunt Plummer, what you make of it, with your eighty-six years?"

"What I make of life, dear?"

"Does it pay, in short? That is what I want to ask of every man, and dare not. If only you would tell me, tell me the truth at your age! I value your testimony. Is it worth while?"

"Yes!" said Aunt Plummer in her deepest tones. "Yes!"

"But you have had an exceptional life."

"Have I? Does it look so to you? You cannot mean wealth, though that has been one of my mercies. Sometimes, in hours of sadness, dear, I have thought that wealth was all I had. In my youth, so long ago, my young lover died. I married years afterwards, and I loved my husband. I have seen other women with their children, and I have had none." She paused a moment, then went on with cheerful self-control, "I have had many friends instead. I have had a beloved nephew, and in these last years I have had Rose Allen. I believe, Ellery, I have known the average of human happiness, no more, no less. It has been the plain human lot; and I can bear witness, life is a blessing. 'Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?'"

Her nephew took her delicate aged hand and held it close until it was warm in his.

"Hark to that bird!" said Tuckerman.

Aunt Plummer shook her head. "The birds went first of all. But I hear your voice perfectly."

Presently she said, "Ellery, I suppose you have been able to go back to all your old ways. Your nieces were

a great interruption to your settled life. We women set less store by liberty and leisure, — perhaps we have no such great uses for them as men have. I have had the freest position a woman can have, that of a childless widow of means. But I was never in love with my freedom. I have had my own way. Has it made a tyrant of me?"

They both laughed. "However," she said with her old energy, "I am not a sentimentalist; liberty and leisure are good things; only there are better, Ellery, — there are better."

"I know it," said her nephew.

The two sat in the sunshine, speaking only occasionally. The afternoon shadow of the high wall crept slow across the garden, marking the hour. Tuckerman watched idly the line of darker green advancing, till they were both within the shadow, and drawn, as it were, into a deeper peace.

"The sun has left us," said Aunt Plummer cheerfully, but Tuckerman noticed the whiteness of her face as the light departed. "I must go into the house. I will see the children in my chamber, if you will help me up the stairs."

"Aunt Plummer, I would avoid stairs," said Tuckerman authoritatively, after they had made the difficult ascent, and his aunt was seated in her armchair, too weary to speak.

"I hear the door-bell," said Tuckerman.

"The children! The children, I warrant you!" The color came back to her face. "Ah, here they are! Your uncle a minute ago was saying pretty things to me about April, and setting out to make me believe

I could grow young again once every year. Now I lay eyes on you, I begin to believe him. My namesake Betsey Bell is better to look at than daffodils."

"Frances calls me according to my character," said the namesake. "When she shakes me, she calls me Bet."

"Where is my grandnephew?"

"He is assimilating new Americans, as Uncle Ellery calls it," Lucy answered. "He has an afternoon service."

"Take care of him, Lucy. That is your calling. Maintain your authority."

Lucy laughed. "I told him I married him to prevent his overworking."

Aunt Plummer gave sage advice as to the management of husbands.

"Did Uncle Plummer always use to do so?" asked Betty, much interested.

"Your Uncle Plummer was one of the best of men," answered his widow evasively.

"And now who reads me Frances' letter?" said Aunt Plummer, turning to Lucy. She listened with many ejaculations. "Yes, yes! Ha, ha!"

Lucy read on. "Just what I predicted!" said Aunt Plummer.

Another paragraph: "Listen to that, Ellery. Your friend Partridge is a rising man."

"I wish she would say something about herself and her clothes and the parties she goes to," said Betty. "*I* don't care for politics."

"Here is a sample of a dinner gown," and Lucy passed it to Aunt Plummer.

"Hand me the child's picture, Ellery. I want to

look at her bright face. She must not think too much of dress. Caution her in your next letter, Ellery."

Her nephew promised, and looked a little anxiously at his aunt, who had been too greatly excited by the arrival of the nieces.

"We will take our leave of you now, dear aunt, and let you rest."

Aunt Plummer had grown white again. "I don't appear to have quite my usual strength to-day," she said gently. "Ellery, you are tired. Go to the spare chamber, and lie down on the sofa. I will sit here quiet in my great chair. Good-by, Lucy, Betty. Dear children — all of you — dear children."

When Rose Allen and Ellery Tuckerman entered the room a half-hour later, they found Aunt Plummer sleeping peacefully.

"The end!" they said together solemnly, and looked into each other's eyes.

A month later, and Tuckerman wandered through the dismantled rooms of the house at Oldhaven, and meditated upon the pathetic helplessness of the dead. The strong will had in one instant abdicated all its rights. The masterful owner of these manifold possessions all at once owned nothing.

To Tuckerman and Miss Allen had fallen the distribution among distant heirs of what was now mere personal property. Everything was packed and ready for despatch, and the keys of the house were to-day to be placed in the hands of a real estate agent. All was natural, necessary, inevitable; one must be reasonable

about such things, said Tuckerman to himself. Yet he sat down upon a packing-case that stood in the middle of the great parlor, and he buried his face in his hands.

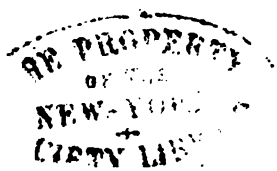
It was the end, the inexorable end, he said again, — the end of one part of himself, bound up with this friend and this home. The sense of the irrecoverable years bowed him down. The death of his aunt had aged him. He remembered the intoxication of the April morning, when he had fancied that youth had returned. He was old and lonely at last; there was no longer any reprieve.

Across his sombre meditations there shot a gleam. He arose and walked about the house, glancing into one echoing room, then into another, till at last he stood at a window looking down upon the garden.

Rose Allen was bending over the flowers, gathering a last handful of lilies of the valley. She suddenly looked up, and Tuckerman saw that her face was wet with tears. She smiled and bent again to her flowers. A ray of afternoon sun was caught in her hair. As he looked down upon the golden-brown head, Tuckerman tried to steady himself and to think calmly. He was quite unaware of the history of his own emotions; it was as if he had fallen in love at first sight with Rose Allen.

She looked up again from her flowers, but not towards his window. She nodded and waved her hand to the children in the next house.

Tuckerman did not know himself in the rush of emotion that drove him to her side. Nor was he the man we have known thus far. It was an impassioned and eloquent lover to whom Rose Allen listened, and to whom she gave her heart and hand.



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